THE MEANING OF AMERICAN HISTORY:
JAPANESE VIEWS

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I

In spite of "national seclusion" enforced by the Tokugawa Shogunate for more than two centuries, Japanese knowledge about the outside world gradually increased with the rise of "Dutch learning." By the second decade of the 19th century, the Shogunate itself began to recognize the necessity of acquiring some knowledge about the outside world. But the mood of complacency continued to dominate the council of the Shogunate. Kazan Watanabe was one of the few intellectuals deeply troubled by this mood. In 1839, Watanabe wrote a manuscript on world affairs, emphasizing Japan's need of learning the scientific mind from the West. In that manuscript, he described in an admiring tone the American struggle for independence and the American republican system. He also noted that America had made a phenomenal development since its independence. He attributed the cause of America's rapid development to the scientific mind, which he regarded as the main strength of the Western civilization. The scientific mind, he reasoned, had brought forth technological advances and better institutions in the West. Apparently, he regarded the American adoption of republican government as a manifestation of the scientific mind.1

The mood of complacency was broken decidedly in 1853 by the arrival of Commodore Perry's "Black Ships" in Edo Bay. Not only the Shogunate government became unable to maintain its cherished policy of national seclusion, but also the Shogunate system itself became increasingly unstable until its demise in 1867.

After 1854, many intellectuals began to show keen interest in knowing about the United States and European countries through Japanese books based on Dutch and Chinese sources. The American triumph in the Revolutionary War and the subsequent rise of the United States as a power seemed to be a good example for the Japanese who felt that they had to maintain their independence amid the presence of aggressive European powers. Shintaro Nakaoka, one of the anti-Shogunate patriots who wanted to create a new central government for ef-

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fective national defense, considered the American Revolution a successful example of the struggle for expelling oppressive foreigners.²

Although Japanese continued to regard the American Revolution primarily as a heroic war for national independence, they gradually began to understand the intellectual aspect of the Revolution. It required some time for Japanese to appreciate such key concepts of modern liberalism as liberty and human rights. It was Yukichi Fukuzawa, the foremost champion of enlightenment in Meiji Japan, who introduced the American Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution to the Japanese public. In Seiyo jiio [Information on the Western World], a phenomenal best-seller first published in 1866, Fukuzawa outlined American history and the American political system and translated the whole text of these basic documents into intelligible Japanese.³ Paraphrasing a sentence from the Declaration of Independence, Fukuzawa began his widely read series of essays Gakumon no susume [An Encouragement of Learning] (1872) with a message of the equality of man: “Heaven did not create a man above or below another man.”⁴

Other major figures of the Meiji Enlightenment, too, began to introduce in their influential books the manifestoes of the American and French Revolutions and the ideas of constitutionalism and republicanism. While Fukuzawa respected the modern Western civilization, he was afraid of Western imperialism. “Western countries are extending their domains in the East,” he warned in 1881, “now their expansion threatens East Asia like a spreading fire.” Fukuzawa was well aware of the fate of American Indians. “Who were the original owners of America?” he asked in 1875. The American Indians had lost their country because of their backwardness. The Asians would lose theirs if they remained backward. Thus Westernization was a necessity for non-Western countries for their survival. His criticism of Western imperialism was rather mild because he firmly believed in the value of civilization and was unsympathetic to backwardness. His view of the West was that of a non-Westerner who was Westernizing himself. Soon he lost sympathy with Japan’s neighbors and later supported its quest for empire in Asia.⁵

Although the champions of the Meiji Enlightenment were hardly political radicals, preferring working for the government or devoting their energy to education and writing, their introduction of the political philosophy of the American and French Revolutions and of modern Western liberalism to the Japanese public had strong impact on the movement known as the Freedom and People’s Rights Movement. Activists of this movement often mentioned the American Revolution in their writings and built up their argument on such concepts as liberty, equality, and the inalienable rights.

Since 1876 was the centennial of the American Revolution, proponents of People’s Rights exhorted the people to learn from the spirit of that revolution. Journals of the movement published articles, with such titles as “An Oppressive Government Should Be Over-

turned” and “Liberty Should Be Bought By Blood.” “Great were the American people of 1776!” praised a writer, “They devoted their souls and bodies to the cause of liberty. They were quite willing to shed their blood. Today’s American liberty is the beautiful tree grown on the American blood shed a century ago.” Another writer wrote in a similar vein: “Genuine liberty is a reward for a bloody struggle, not for a discourse on the table. . . . If we want to have genuine liberty we should be prepared to sacrifice hundreds of our lives!”

Confronted with rising demand for constitutional government, the Meiji government on the one hand promised in 1881 to open a National Diet nine years later and on the other hand applied various repressive measures against anti-government activities. In 1889, the Meiji government finally promulgated the Constitution of Imperial Japan, a conservative constitution modeled after the Prussian Constitution. It was more than half a century later that Japan replaced the Constitution of 1889 with a new constitution influenced by American constitutional thought.

Although the Meiji Constitution was a conservative one, its promulgation tamed political discontent. The decline of the Freedom and People’s Rights Movement ended the age during which many Japanese found the American Revolution an inspiring example directly relevant to their political activities.

As the Japanese ruling elite looked to European countries for institutional models, the Japanese institutions for higher education were modeled after German universities. Scholars in the emerging Japanese academic community also looked to European scholarship. For Japanese professors teaching Western history, Western history meant European history. The United States and the whole Western Hemisphere were largely left outside the realm of history.

The wider Japanese public, on the other hand, continued to take an interest at least in one aspect of the American experience, that exemplified by the life of Benjamin Franklin. Several versions of translation of his autobiography were published in Meiji Japan and inspired many youths to emulate his effort toward self-improvement and his pursuit of success. Although Meiji Japan had aspects of backwardness, it opened widely the road to wealth, power, and honor to youths regardless of their family status in feudal Japan. Franklin’s popularity reflected this newly-opened opportunity for success.

The image of America represented by Franklin’s success story was that of a land of opportunity. Some Japanese hoped to escape from their poverty by emigrating to the land of opportunity. Many Japanese might have emigrated to the United States if Japanese immigration had not been restricted. The exclusion of Japanese immigration was enacted in 1924, after Japan had practiced self-restriction for more than fifteen years. The anti-Japanese immigration movement culminating to the immigration act of 1924 gave many disappointed Japanese the impression that racial prejudice was a part of the American tradition.

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II

The exclusion of Japanese immigrants took place toward the end of the Taisho Era (1912–26), which witnessed the rise of democratic spirit. The American exclusion of Japanese immigration inevitably weakened respect for the American liberal tradition among the Japanese, although liberals believed that the Americans would rectify their wrong in the future. Liberals in the Taisho Era were inspired by Woodrow Wilson’s international leadership and impressed by democratic America’s rise as the most powerful nation. There was widespread feeling that democracy would be the spirit of the new age in the world. In this intellectual climate, scholarly interest in America began to develop. Inazo Nitobe, a leading liberal intellectual, declared that the growing importance of democratic thought had made American studies “a very important task for the Japanese.” The task was taken up by Yasaka Takagi, the highly respected pioneer of American studies in the Japanese academia. Throughout his long career, it was his scholarly interest to trace the origin and development of democracy in America and learn from the American experience.

In 1931, Takagi published Beikoku seiiji-shi jostetsu (it may be translated as The Founding of the American Political Tradition), an intellectual and institutional history of Colonial and Revolutionary America. This was an epoch-making work in American studies in Japan. In the same year as Takagi published this splendid work, the Japanese Army began aggressive military action in Manchuria. Increasingly, Japan fell under the control of the militarists. In 1937, Japan began a new war in China. As a result, U.S.-Japanese relations greatly deteriorated in the subsequent years. Takagi tried in vain to use his influence to prevent the outbreak of the catastrophic war with the United States. Amid hysterical anti-Americanism of the World War II years, he continued to lecture on American democracy for his students, emphasizing, as usual, Puritanism and the frontier experience as its main sources. This much of academic freedom remained in the Tokyo Imperial University during the war years.

Takagi duly recognized expansion as an important aspect of the American experience. It was easy to see the American expansionist tradition from this side of the Pacific. The United States expanded to the Pacific coast by the middle of the 19th century, and within a few years dispatched a fleet to force Japan to open its doors for foreign intercourse. By the end of the 19th century, the United States annexed Hawaii, the Philippines, and Guam, and began to participate actively in Asian international politics with a particular focus on China. Although the United States actually was unwilling to force a showdown with Japan over Chinese affairs, Japanese leaders always had to take American economic and naval

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10 (Tokyo: Yuhikaku, 1931).
power into account. When Takagi felt that American intellectuals were overly critical of
Japanese policy on the Asian continent in the 1930s, he mentioned in his writings the history
of American expansion. He also tried to find similarities in the ideals of the foreign policies
of the two countries, although he was critical of the gap between Japanese ideals and prac-
tices.\textsuperscript{11} It may be said that Akira lriye's works, such as \textit{Pacific Estrangement} and \textit{Power and
Culture}, inherited Takagi's views on the U.S.-Japanese relations.

When World War II finally ended, Japanese liberals were determined to reconstruct the
country as a liberal democracy. Looking back the history of modern Japan from the Meiji
Restoration to the defeat in 1945, liberal intellectuals reconfirmed their view that Japanese
modernization had been superficial. Modern Japan had retained authoritarian and quasi-
feudal elements. The ruling elite had fostered Emperor worship to legitimatize their rule
and mobilize the people for nation building and war. That is to say, Japan had not experi-
enced a liberal democratic bourgeois revolution. Besides, Japan had lacked a spiritual
element, such as Protestant ethics, suitable to developing a full-fledged modern personality.
Thus the blossoming of liberalism in the 1920s had turned out to be fragile and short-lived,
and it had been replaced by an authoritarian and militarist regime in the 1930s. Liberal
historians considered American and British history a yardstick to measure the backwardness
of modern, or pseudo-modern, Japan.

Marxist historians shared with them the same view regarding Japan's backwardness.
Although Marxists became very critical of the United States in the Cold-War Era, they
continued to admire Franklin D. Roosevelt's America. Instead of going Fascist or militarist,
America of the 1930s had formed a broad coalition of democratic forces and promoted
social democracy under the name of the New Deal. Because of the strength of democratic
forces, they reasoned, the United States had fought the axis powers in alliance with the
Soviet Union. Why had the United States not gone Fascist or militarist? The left attri-
buted the reason to the long tradition of bourgeois liberalism and the growing influence of
the working class.

III

The seeming ascendancy of reactionary forces in the Cold-War Era perplexed Japanese
Marxists, and the raging storm of McCarthyism disturbed Japanese liberals. Both Marxist
and liberal historians could not explain persuasively enough what was happening in America
in terms of their historical perspectives. It was Makoto Saito, then a young scholar of
U.S. political history who presented a historical perspective relevant to the contemporary
American scene. Adopting Toqueville's as well as Louis Hartz's insight into the American
political culture, Saito developed an interpretation of American history that stressed such
factors as the lack of pre-modern ages, the absence of fundamental conflicts in values, the
existence of a spacious continent separated from Europe by an ocean, and the necessity of
a national ideology to maintain the integrity of a nation of immigrants as basic factors which
shaped the character of the American political culture. He analyzed the psycho-ideological

\textsuperscript{11} Takagi Yasaka chosakushu, Vol. 3, pp. 235–58, 259–74; See also Amerika seishin o motomete, pp. 158–
61.
characteristics of the American political culture derived from these unique factors in the American national experience and explained in terms of those characteristics why U.S. foreign policy often lacked a proper understanding of the other parts of the world and why pressure for conformity was so strong in America in the age of international tension.12

Like American “consensus historians,” Saito tended to “homogenize” American history. Seen from the vantage point of the 1980s, he appears to have homogenized American history excessively. He implicitly slighted the importance of the Civil War and race relations, for he did not discuss them much. The 1950s, however, was the decade in which such homogenizing seemed to make sense. There was broad consensus on foreign policy as well as domestic affairs. To be sure, America was not without problems. But the main cause of American troubles, so it seemed, was the fact that the country had been blessed with an exceptionally happy national experience. The days of urban racial disturbances and of the “black power” movement still belonged to the future.

As it was to be revealed vividly in the 1960s, America was not free from the burden of an unhappy past. As far as its international environments were concerned, however, the American past had been doubtlessly a happy one. Because of their happy international circumstances, Nagayo Homma remarked in 1967, the Americans had been able to “avoid politics,” that is, to avoid playing power politics, in foreign relations. After the Second World War, it was no longer possible for the United States to “avoid politics.” The United States had to remain in the arena of global power politics to contain the expansion of the Communist bloc. Homma suspected, however, the United States was still attempting to avoid politics by substituting military intervention for diplomacy. Since the United States maintained balance of power in East Asia, he observed, disarmed Japan could afford to “avoid politics.” Japanese intellectuals were able to take a very idealistic stance regarding international affairs, just as Americans had been able to do in the past. They criticized American foreign policy, measuring it against the standard of American idealism. Many Japanese intellectuals were opposed to the new U.S.-Japanese security treaty from an idealistic viewpoint, protesting Japan’s deeper involvement in international power politics. They might appear anti-American, but their anti-Americanism was ideologically based on American idealism. As Homma commented, this was an irony in U.S.-Japanese relations.13

As America’s military involvement in Vietnam deepened, the Japanese public became increasingly critical of U.S. policy in Vietnam. Agitated by the Vietnam War and black

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radicalism, some Japanese historians presented a negative interpretation of American history. Tomohisa Shimizu, author of *Amerika teikoku* [The American Empire, 1968], is the most eloquent exponent of this interpretation. He argued that American history must be seen as the history of an empire, not as the history of a democracy. He defined an empire as a system of expansion and of exploitation and subjugation of underdeveloped non-Western peoples. Since exploitation and subjugation of underdeveloped peoples at home and abroad had been an integral part of American history, he maintained, American aggression in Vietnam was not a deviation from, but an inevitable consequence of, the American past. But this American Empire was now on the verge of collapse, he concluded, as it was challenged by revolutionary movements of militant minorities at home and of the Vietnamese and other peoples in the Third World.14

His interpretation was radical, but not Marxist. He replaced class struggle with race struggle, as the key concept in understanding American history. His emphasis on racism ran parallel to the indictment of white America by radical American blacks and other minorities and by Third World radicals. His view reflected one aspect of the Japanese intellectual climate toward the end of the 1960s. But his book also had long-term significance. First, his debunking of the American past heralded the day when Japanese could no longer regard the advanced Western countries as their models. Secondly, Shimizu's de-emphasis on Marxian class categories indicated that even radical intellectuals began to feel that these categories became increasingly irrelevant in the contemporary world. Thirdly, he led other Japanese historians in recognizing race as a basic factor in American history. Since Japanese immigrants had been discriminated in America, Japanese historians had been well aware of the importance of race in American history. But they had not emphasized it, because they had intended to learn the positive aspects of American democracy or to use the American past to measure Japan's backwardness. Japanese historians now emphasize it as one of the basic factors in American history and pay far more attention than before to the minorities in their research and writings. Scholarly interest in the historical experience of Japanese-Americans has been increasing.

At the end of the 1960s, the view that the United States was on the verge of social and political disintegration was not limited to Shimizu. Yonosuke Nagai, a non-left liberal political scientist, expressed in "Kaitai suru Amerika" [Disintegrating America], an article published in 1970, his fear that American society had lost its resilience. Nagai argued that the United States was now confronted with a multi-dimensional crisis because those aspects of American society which had previously been considered America's assets (the vast space, the highly mobile population, the enormous amount of capital available for rapid technological development, the ability to transmit massive information, the tradition of grass-root democracy and vigilantism, etc.) turned out to be liabilities in the new circumstances. Their negative effects amplified each other, destroying healthy balance in the ecological system of the American social life. As a result, he observed, Americans were caught in a vicious cycle of irritation and mutual distrust.15

Nagai had earlier characterized American society as a flexible structure capable of absorbing the impact of various social conflicts. Since the same author now confessed

14 *Amerika teikoku* (Tokyo, Aki Shobo, 1968).
that he was almost panicked by the American scene, this article attracted considerable attention. Akira Iriye, a Japan-born historian active in American academic circles, observed that Nagai’s image of the American crisis reflected the view of East coast intellectuals of the late 1960s. Iriye stressed the strength of American liberalism. His point was well taken, because the Americans were able to overcome in the early 1970s political and social polarization caused by the Vietnam War and urban racial disturbances. Thus they had demonstrated their resilience and adaptability.

But such social maladies as the increase of crime, the spread of illicit drugs, and the decline of work ethics, lingered in America. Institutions which had commanded respect and thus had served as integrating forces in American society—such as the church, school, and family—seemed to be losing their former authority. Popular deference for Presidency, which had been an important asset for Presidential leadership, declined visibly after the Watergate scandal.

V

Books on contemporary America began to mushroom in Japan around the end of the 1960s. Until then books on American affairs had not enjoyed a mass market. Ordinary Japanese had taken the United States for granted as a superpower capable to maintain pax Americana, not to mention domestic stability. When it became uncertain whither America was heading, the wider Japanese public began to take keen interest in American affairs. This increasing interest reflected Japanese surprise at and concern with seeming turmoil in the country they had regarded as a model democracy.

The two oil crises of the 1970s put a strain on the socio-economic fabric of industrial democracies and generated a doubt about the future of their way of life. Western Europe, in particular, suffered severely from the impact of the oil crises. It seemed to be affected by various social maladies. Obviously neither the United States nor any Western European country could serve Japan as a model country any longer. While Japanese liberals had lost their advanced model countries, Japanese Marxists had lost theirs. They had been disenchanted by the realities of the communist world. As Masanao Kano wrote recently, “We once thought we had the ‘shining’ American-type democracy or the ‘infallible’ Soviet-type socialism as a sure guide to a bright future. The ascendancy of the Third World also seemed to indicate a path to a better future. It was as if we had been able to choose one from the several bright ‘futures’ contending for the destiny of history. . . . Such old days have long been gone.”

By the 1970s, Japan itself had become a leading industrial power. In spite of the lack of energy resources, Japan managed to absorb the shocks of the oil crises in the decade. Japan also succeeded in creating a mass middle-class society. Besides, Japanese liberal democratic politics seemed to have been well established. Thus Japanese could be proud of their achievements. Some Japanese intellectuals, flattered by such compliments by Amer-

\[18\] "Nihon, Amerika, Sekai" [Japan, the United States, and the Worldj, ibid., Vol. 86, no. 1 (1971), pp. 54–75.

\[17\] "Rekishi ishiki no genzai" [Historical Consciousness Today], Rekishigaku kenkyu, No. 532 (Sept., 1984), p. 7.
ican observers as “Japan as Number One” and “The 21st Century will be Japan’s Century,” have begun to argue that it is the turn for the rest of the world to emulate Japan’s example. Several traditional traits of Japanese society, which were previously regarded as remnants of feudalism are now claimed as sources of Japan’s success.

But most Japanese intellectuals do not think that Japan can be immune for long to social maladies affecting other industrial democracies. Some symptoms of these maladies are already discernible. Besides, Japan is so closely tied with other industrial democracies, they reason, that the nation cannot prosper alone if the other industrial democracies are going to decline. Thus they are concerned with the common fate of industrial democracies.

It is this concern with their common fate that prompted Masataka Kosaka, a well-known scholar on international history and contemporary international relations, to write Bunmei no suibo surutoki [When Civilizations Decline] in 1981. In this book, he traces the process of the decline of the Roman Empire and the Venetian Republic and offers an analysis of the present predicaments of the United States. He observes that the sources of America’s present predicaments were sown in the very success of the American civilization. His book is pervaded with long-term pessimism for the future of the United States, Japan and other industrial democracies.\(^{18}\)

Probably, average Japanese may entertain a brighter view of America than Japanese intellectuals. Books on American history sell better than those on any other foreign nation’s history in Japan. This is not simply because Japanese think the United States is an important country. There is in American history something appealing to them. Last year, the American History Through Biographies Series was published for a mass audience.\(^{19}\) If such a series is popular in Japan, it means that average Japanese view American history as the history of a nation of heroes and superstars. Like the case of the popularity of Western movies, nostalgia for the bygone past may be the major source of the popularity of such history books. But average Japanese very possibly consider that America is still a country where heroes and superstars can gain an enormous wealth, a glamorous life-style, great power, or a global fame. It is this American scale, I surmise, not only in the territorial space but also in personal success, that is very appealing to Japanese. If that is the case, we may say that the American dream is still alive.

VI

Generally speaking, Japanese specialists in American history have not actively participated in discussion on contemporary America. Instead of dealing with such a broad question as the meaning of American history, most of them have been engaged in research and writing on particular topics of limited scope. Several circumstances have promoted this tendency. First, the volume of primary sources available in Japan has been increased greatly in the past twenty years. Secondly, a research trip to the United States became much more affordable for Japanese scholars in the 1970s because of the rise of their income

\(^{18}\) Bunmei no suibo suru toki, (Tokyo, Shinchosha, 1981).

\(^{19}\) Jimbutsu Amerika-shi (8 vols., Tokyo, Shueisha, 1983–84).
relative to the expense of the trans-Pacific travel. These two factors have made it easier for Japanese historians to study deeply on a specific topic. Thirdly, the system of postgraduate history education which encourages students to specialize in a specific topic from the beginning has certainly stimulated this tendency.

It may also be added that most of the Japanese specialists in American history have not been called on by the public to discuss contemporary American affairs. There is almost an unlimited volume of information about America in Japan. Therefore, many Japanese claim they are knowledgeable about America. Actually, they often lack good knowledge of American history. Nevertheless, public discussion on American affairs has been conducted mostly by non-historians, and specialists in American history have been allowed to be absorbed in topics of their own interests.

This specialization, I suspect, has resulted partly from the difficulty in defining the meaning of American history in this age of uncertainty. Japanese specialists in American history have lost a sure sense of progress with which historians were able to write a history. As the industrial civilization will be seriously strained by environmental limitations, and as the social maladies affecting industrial democracies are unexpected new phenomena, historians cannot be certain about the future of industrial democracies. The development of nuclear weapons strengthens their sense of uncertainty. If they are uncertain of the future and ambivalent about the value of industrialization, it is difficult for them to define a meaning of the American past.

However, it is now possible to discern among Japanese historians several gropings for a broad view of American history. Some historians, accepting industrialization as a matter of historical fact, attempt to view American economic and social history in a global, long-range perspective, such as Emmanuel Wallerstein has presented. They intend to trace interaction between America and the rest of the world in the development of the modern capitalist world system and discuss the meaning of American socio-economic history in that context. Obviously, they are prompted to seek such an approach by the current strain in international economic relations, particularly U.S.-Japanese frictions.

Others may try to view American history in a comparative cultural perspective. As Japan’s relations with the United States have become very close and multi-dimensional, and as serious economic frictions have developed in this close relationship, Japanese are now required to examine differences and similarities between the cultures of the two nations. Japanese historians should, and some of them are trying to, provide such examination with a historical perspective. While both Japan and the United States are committed to liberal democratic principles and are trying to preserve them in an uncertain world, there is striking difference in the ethnic structure of the two nations. When Japanese, whose nation is ethnically homogeneous and whose democracy depends on this homogeneity, look at the American past and present in a proper historical perspective, they will find it most remarkable that the United States has made considerable success in integrating an increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-racial nation in a liberal democracy. The degree of success in this integration demonstrates the strength of the American liberal democratic tradition and the openness of American society. Because of great progress made in this respect, the United States seems to be a country engaged in a significant experiment in human history.

The Japanese people are now confronted with the task of “internationalizing” themselves. That is to say, they should not only participate increasingly actively in the multi-ethnic and
multi-racial world community but also make their own society more open to the other peoples. Therefore, there is much for them to learn from this historic American experience. Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's insensitive remarks about minorities in the United States were widely reported in October 1986 through the international mass media and angered many Americans and other peoples. This unfortunate episode acutely demonstrated the Japanese necessity of learning how to live in multi-ethnic and multi-racial society.

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