

SERVING IN THE OCCUPATION

An Interview with Wilton Dillon

Born in Yale, Oklahoma, in 1923, anthropologist Wilton S. Dillon is now Senior Scholar Emeritus at the Smithsonian Institution, where he has spent more than forty years. He came there in 1969 from the National Academy of Sciences as Director of Smithsonian International Symposia and later Founding Director of Interdisciplinary Studies. Dillon earned a 1951 BA at the University of California, Berkeley, in Communications and Public Policy. His 1961 Columbia Anthropology PhD dissertation was published as *Gifts and Nations*. Dillon's writings on Japan have appeared in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Virginia Review of Asian Studies*, *Columbia Forum*, and *Far Eastern Ceramic Bulletin*. Daniel A. Métraux, Professor of Asian Studies at Mary Baldwin College, conducted the interview.



Wilton Dillon in Japan, 1946. Courtesy of Wilton Dillon.

Daniel Métraux: *Dr. Dillon, you served in the military in the Pacific and were in Japan from 1945 to 1948. Why were you in Japan, and what were you doing there?*

Wilton Dillon: As a “boot on the ground” upon arrival in December 1945, I had no real military duties except a few days operating Morse code from the site of what is now Tokyo Tower. By January, I opted to stay in Japan as a civilian informational specialist in the Press and Publications Unit of the Civil Information and Education (CI&E) Section of Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP). My first duty: Japanese press liaison officer for the US Education Mission to Japan and later the Allied Control Council. My three years were climaxed by work on the War Guilt Information Program, an impossible task because of Japanese aversion to “guilt” rather than “shame,” as described in Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*. I returned to the US in December 1948 to resume undergraduate studies interrupted by war.

Daniel Métraux: *I have read several interviews given by a variety of Japanese during the early years of the Occupation. Some of those interviewed said that they regarded the Americans and their allies as “liberators” rather than “occupiers” because they got rid of an authoritarian regime that had only brought misery to the Japanese people.*

Wilton Dillon: There was no doubt that we were occupiers. The Potsdam Declaration made that clear, as did MacArthur’s signing of the surrender aboard the *USS Missouri*, followed by Hirohito’s submissive call on the supreme commander.

Nevertheless, in my first weeks at CI&E in February 1946, I became aware that SCAP reforms would depend on prewar Japanese initiatives. Examples: (1) Japanese alumnae of US women’s colleges (e.g., Wellesley, Bryn Mawr) were already advocating improvements in the status of women; postwar Occupation efforts built upon these earlier Japanese reformists; (2) Japanese language simplification (*romaji*, *kunrei-shiki*) depended also on prewar advocates of modernization needed for international commerce. Abraham Halpern, linguistic anthropologist and specialist in American Indian languages, spearheaded simplification efforts (he influenced my later shift from political science to anthropology); (3) Land reform during the Occupation had roots in the 1868–1912 Meiji Restoration.

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General MacArthur and Hirohito. Source: <http://tiny.cc/5cj9mw>.

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SCAP’s agrarian reforms were led by Wolf Ladajinsky, who often appeared at press conferences I helped organize. Tenant cultivators took control of 80 percent of land once owned by absentee landlords. MacArthur studied Roman efforts at land tenure in North Africa to better understand the historical precedents of what we were doing.

The spectrum between “occupation” and “liberation” may include Japanese psychology. Nobody likes defeat and occupation, e.g., the American South after the Civil War. Benedict’s *The Crysanthemum and the Sword* may explain better what I have long felt—the Japanese accepted and mainly cooperated with the Occupation out of respect for the strength of the victor. The atomic response to Pearl Harbor provided a *teaching moment* for the Japanese. How were we to learn from the people who beat us so that this disaster would not happen again?

Daniel Métraux: *Was there a sense of partnership and/or trust between Americans and Japanese? Did both sides see themselves as working toward a common goal? Was there much friction between Japanese and American officials?*

Wilton Dillon: Japanese forms of resistance to our New Deal agenda never seemed hostile; mainly, at conference tables in Radio Tokyo, Japanese avoided disagreement by refusing to say yes or no. Ambiguity prevailed. Green tea and tangerines were props for “passive resistance,” as were stiff and formal body language. I cannot remember specific issues, merely a cultural pattern to avoid seeming impolite. This irritated the impatient, get-closure, linear-thinking occupiers. Americans sought straight answers. We tried consensus out of wanting to be “democratic.” Hiroshima and Nagasaki were fresh in the memory of both the Japanese and the “victors.” So we were keenly aware of Japanese diplomats still engaged in war prevention as their planes were en route to Pearl Harbor. Hypocrisy, treachery, “infamy” were synonyms not far below the surface of our consciousness in 1946.

Yet, T.V. Smith, University of Chicago philosopher and member of the US Education Mission to Japan in April 1946, offered this advice to other educators debating changes in curriculum on etiquette, “Remember that the Japanese have spent centuries learning how to spare each other from daily hurt.” The context: arguments over how to eliminate militaristic influence in *bushido*. We were to become accustomed to inconsistency and paradox. We began to admire the Japanese acquiescence to the Occupation. How different would American resistance have been to a Japanese occupation?

Daniel Métraux: *What were the goals of the Occupation when you arrived? Had these goals changed at all by the time you left in 1948?*

Wilton Dillon: My briefing upon arrival in CI&E’s Press and Publications Unit began with required reading of the Potsdam Declaration. Article 6 aimed to wipe out Japan’s military. MacArthur translated Potsdam as his mandate to destroy military power, build representative government, free political prisoners, enfranchise women, liberate farmers, destroy monopolies, end police repression, demilitarize education, and create a new constitution embodying principles of democracy.

Our weekly press conferences for Japanese media were programmed around these and other goals. We were a proto-USIA. Some of my colleagues were alumni of the Office of Strategic Services in China and the Office of War Information.

Cultural diplomacy was part of our mission, e.g., exposing Japan to Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. Food shortages brought on more practical

pursuits. We broadcast recipes for how to eat freely distributed Vienna sausages and tolerate Arkansas brown rice. Then we touted hydroponic approaches to growing hothouse food. Only the French refused to follow MacArthur’s dictates against buying food from the Japanese countryside. He wanted us to stick to imported foodstuffs, save the food for hungry Japanese while reducing the risk to occupiers of tummy troubles perhaps derived from Japanese “honeybucket” use of human feces as fertilizer.

Three years after I arrived, the goals remained the same. Anti-Communism became more intense. Some Japanese capitalists, I believe, were concerned that SCAP espousal of the Trade Union Movement was “too leftist” (An exception: My Mitsui family friends were Anglican Christians active in the Moral Rearmament Movement, supporting SCAP goals.)

Edgar Snow’s *Red Star over China* was often quoted as a warning to what might happen in Japan. But our “reforms” were believed to reduce that possibility, particularly in land tenure. I was sensitive to this. In 1945 Manila, before my arrival in Tokyo, I saw peasants—led by Luis Taruc’s Hukbalahap Movement—storming Malacanan Palace to demand economic justice. In Tokyo, I saw Korean workers often parading in protest to their “slavery” under Japanese Occupation and as migrant outsiders in Japanese factories. They carried red flags. Occupied Japan was not immune from social unrest taking place elsewhere in Asia. War was gestating in Korea as Mao’s armies seized the mainland.

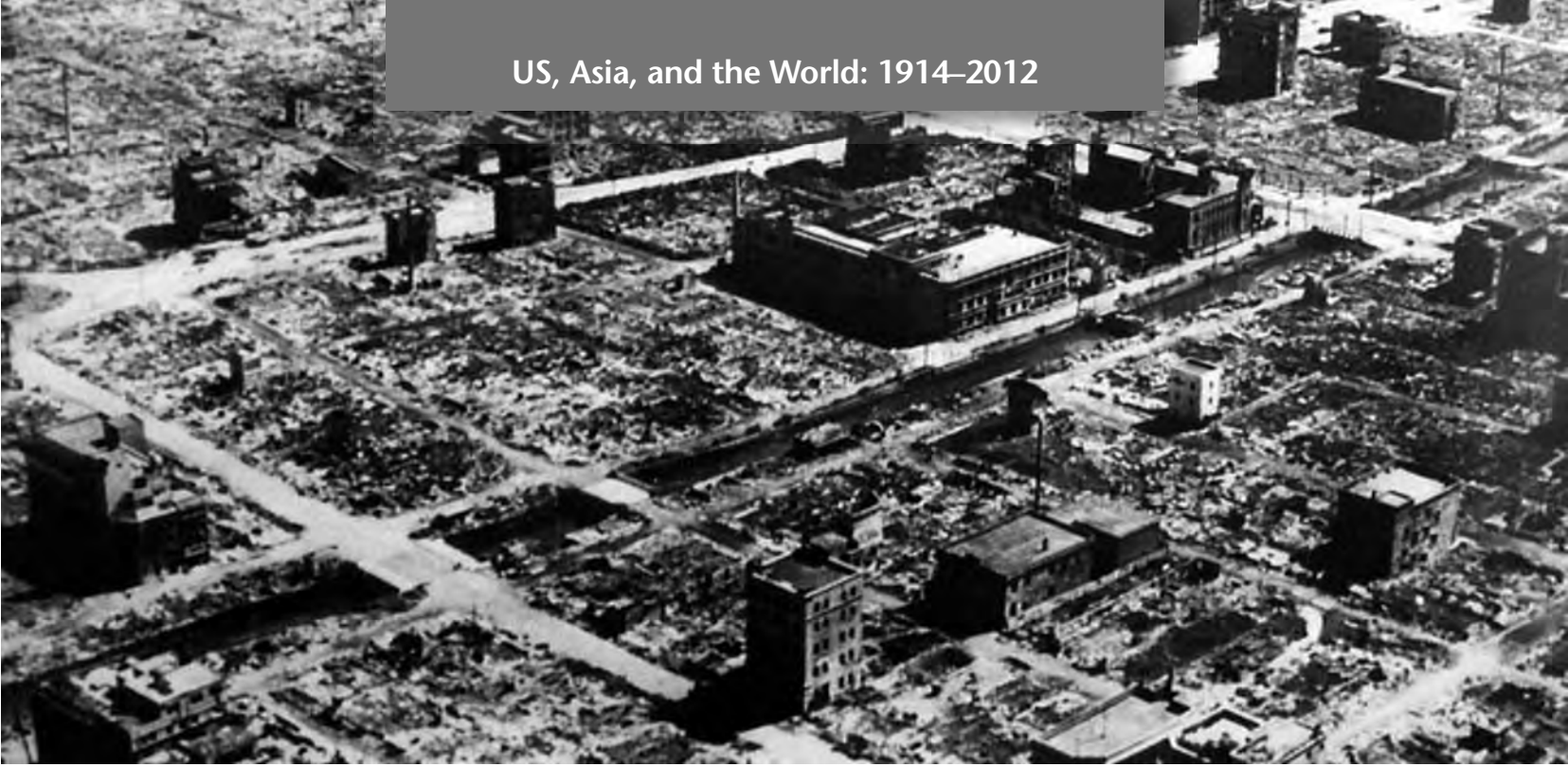
Daniel Métraux: *When you first arrived in 1945, was there any overt hostility toward you and Americans in general by the Japanese? Was there any real anger over the firebombing of Tokyo or the atom bombs?*

Wilton Dillon: I never experienced either, personally or in my work. Intelligence officers in General Willoughby’s G2 were always on guard to detect “insurgency.” CI&E’s public opinion and sociological research staff, led by anthropologists John W. Bennett and Iwao Ishino, conducted a study of the *oyabun-kobun* (boss-follower, parent-child) institution. This Mafia-like, feudal, ritual kinship system was a key to understanding paternalistic controls that helped provide social stability in industry, agriculture, and even street vendors. Did this explain why the Occupation worked so well?

In any case, Howard Handelman of the International News Service wrote a story describing the findings as “an underground or invisible government.” G2 was alarmed. Rumors spread around Radio Tokyo that our intelligence agents were scurrying around remote mountain areas to round up threats to perceived law and order. The journalist’s metaphor was taken literally.

Hiroshima and Negasaki were places where one might expect hostility. In neither place did I find anything but hospitality. The gruesome technicolor footage of the Hiroshima devastation was to be suppressed by the US for thirty years. But when I was there in early 1946 with the CI&E radio unit to report on a new “The Man on the Street” show—live, candid interviews—the radioactive survivors needed no evidence beyond their memory. The Hiroshima mayor surprisingly welcomed us. He even was host to a *geisha*-like banquet for us visitors at an undamaged inn. We spent a raucous evening in sight of the World Heritage Itsukushima Shinto shrine, whose red *torii* stands in tidal waters of the Inland Sea. Eventually, a peace memorial would reveal some of the enduring scars as a warning against atomic warfare.

Though spared atomic bombs, Tokyo’s scorched earth from firebombing still haunts me. Huge waste landscapes greeted my arrival in December 1945—except for buildings near the Imperial Palace where we were



Tokyo at the end of the war. Source: <http://tiny.cc/9ej9mw>.

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billeted. I heard firsthand reports from two Axis survivors, my German harpsichordist landlady and her Japanese maid. They plunged into Tokyo canals with flames arching overhead before being rescued by Sophia University Jesuits. *Roppongi* skyscrapers now stand in the rubble where I used to find Japanese women to wash my clothes.

Daniel Métraux: *How important was General MacArthur's leadership to the Occupation?*

Wilton Dillon: Central casting could not have done better than to assign MacArthur as supreme commander. William Manchester's superb 1978 *American Caesar* book confirms my observations. The general's austerity, courage, *noblesse oblige*, and social distance resonated with the *samurai* tradition. He knew that he, like the shoguns, should rule as "the man behind the bamboo screen." He was no more "folksy" than the feudal leaders who controlled Japan before Commodore Perry's black ships. Japan had the advantage of two emperors at once.

Though I lived for a year behind his residence at the embassy, I never saw him up close. Often, I watched clusters of Japanese and Americans await his ritual lunchtime exits from the Dai Ichi headquarters to join his wife and son. Riding with him in his 1941 Cadillac were my fellow Oklahoman, Major Faubion Bowers, his interpreter, and a specialist on *kabuki* drama. What Faubion told me—mainly "Caesar's" sense of history—matched Manchester's narrative. So did the MacArthur profile in works of John W. Dower.

MacArthur's Episcopal upbringing inspired his linking democracy to Christianity. He supported missionaries and importation of ten million Bibles. On the other hand, at CI&E, we were busily preaching the gospel of separation of religion and statecraft. Shinto had been "the engine of government." So we tried to deal with that ambiguity by bringing in a Yale Divinity School professor to demonstrate then-new methods of communications technology for diffusion of beliefs of Buddhism or any other religionists interested. We occupiers had much to learn about Japanese syncretism of several faiths.

The importance of MacArthur's leadership cannot be overestimated. The symbiotic coupling of MacArthur's own imperial style with traditional Japanese patterns of authority was a modern example of *yin-yang*. This was a monumental historical coincidence. With or without MacArthur, retention of the emperor system held the country together.

Daniel Métraux: *You were an in-person witness to some of the Tokyo war crimes trials. In your opinion, were the trials carried out fairly? How did the Japanese you knew react to the trials?*

Wilton Dillon: Kurosawa's movie *Rashomon* provides a metaphor for multiple perceptions of "truth," especially regarding relativity of guilt in war crimes trials. In the cases of Nuremberg and Tokyo, prosecution arguments were imbedded in verifiable atrocities related to wars of aggression. Yet, sixty years after the Tokyo trial, debates were still underway about a "victors' justice." A Japanese professor convened a symposium to explore the relevance of the trial as precedent for the world court prosecuting leaders in Africa and the Balkans.

The chief dissenter at the Tokyo trial, Justice Radhabinod Pal, Indian jurist, is memorialized at the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo, a stronghold of nationalist fervor. I knew both he and another dissenter, Professor B.V.A. Roling of the Netherlands, had no contact with the dissenting French judge. Pal allegedly had a record of admiring Japan as a bulwark against British imperial rule of India.

My closest contact at the court was an exceedingly fair-minded Australian, Sir William Webb, who presided over an eleven-member tribunal that included the USSR and China. He aggressively challenged both prosecution and defense attorneys. Off the bench, he never showed me any signs of "Aussie" revenge against Japanese atrocities. We spoke of the variety of legal systems represented on the court and the challenge of finding common ground before reaching a verdict. Twenty-eight leaders were indicted; twenty-five were found guilty.

Atrocities visually demonstrated in Tokyo (e.g., the rape of Nanjing) were already familiar to me from my days watching the Yamashita trial in

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Manila. Seeing Yamashita and Tojo in the docks made me wonder how they might have controlled soldiers under their command. Both were caught in the prosecution arguments of “responsibility of the state.” Were defense arguments about individual responsibility less convincing to the jurists?

While watching defendants daily in the bright lights of the court, I realized I was witness to a Kipling-like drama about the great divide between East and West. Western notions of time were linked to individual responsibility—who, for example, lagged in handling the telegrams just before Pearl Harbor? Even American defense lawyers argued neo-Daoist philosophy: war, floods, earthquakes are forces of nature. No individuals are responsible.

Trying to make the Japanese feel guilty for the war, CI&E arranged for Claude Buss, Stanford historian, to be secluded under guard to summarize the complex court records. We gave summaries to the media on judgment day. I have always wondered whether the novelist, Yukio Mishima, ever read them before he committed *seppuku* on the balcony of the Defense Ministry where the trials were held. His 1970 symbolic death was interpreted as a protest against Japan’s abandoning the sword in favor of the chrysanthemum. My wife and I once dined with Mishima and his friend, Donald Keene, at a Chinese restaurant in Harlem. We never discussed war crimes or the fairness of the Tokyo trial.

Daniel Métraux: *Why did the Japanese cooperate with SCAP and the Allies?*

Wilton Dillon: I can only guess. Could these be factors—pragmatism, attitudes toward authority, a desire to learn from a victor strong enough to win, MacArthur’s leadership, and a long history of resilience and recovery from natural disasters? In seeing pictures of Japanese responses to the 2011 *tsunami*, I once again thought of sustainable Japanese social techniques of adapting to defeat and occupation. These include habits of mutual aid.

Cooperation was based also on Japanese self-interest. That included reformists welcoming occupiers as effective partners to achieve prewar initiatives we already discussed. We have also mentioned Japanese traditions of the etiquette of hospitality. Would it not be impolite to be rude to even uninvited guests?

Pragmatism also seems to have been coupled with a “fatalistic” attitude implied by—*shikata-ga-nai*—“it can’t be helped.” That is, acceptance of reality (defeat) served as a mentally healthy starting point for survival and renewal. Could cooperation also have been related to a wish to avoid collective pain? Conquerors with atomic bombs have tools that tend to focus attention. But I doubt that such subliminal motives to cooperate figured in the Occupation.

Better answers to this question would lie in new historical social science inquiries by Japanese and reading Japanese literary products of the epoch—poems, plays, and novels. What jokes, satire, or folk songs gave relief to the vanquished? Remember Japanese woodprints of red-faced, big-nosed Dutchmen in old Yokohama?

I like to think that one of many clues would be an exploration of Japanese notions of *asobe*. How does play or playfulness influence decisions to cope with misfortune? Such an outrageous hunch might inspire a new wave of cooperation between Japanese and foreign scholars trying to figure out the dynamics of resolving conflict by operating together. In the Occupation, the victors brought food and defense protection in exchange for polite submission. Reciprocity, especially unspoken, may have worked magic.

I now find old-fashioned concepts of national character useful constructs for guessing. Why did Norway punish *quislings* under Nazi Occu-

pation and the Japanese not punish American Occupation collaborators? The whole Japanese nation would have been at fault.

Daniel Métraux: *In your opinion, was the Occupation a success? Did it accomplish many of its goals? If yes, why? If no, why not?*

Wilton Dillon: Cause and effect are hard to define. Yet the post-Occupation boom may be partially explained by what the Occupation did to bring Japan back into the world community. I speak of economics and trade, of course, but also of the benefits Japan received by acceptance of our imposed “peace constitution.”

Remember the *LIFE* magazine story of Japanese student opposition to a 1960 state visit by President Eisenhower? Jay Rockefeller, who learned Japanese as a student in Japan there, explained to readers that Japanese youth were so devoted to protecting their constitution that they wished to warn President Eisenhower not to mess with it. Ike’s scheduled visit, which was canceled, coincided with the ratification of a new US-Japan defense treaty being negotiated by Premier Kishi.

Yes, the demilitarization of Japan was well underway long after the Occupation ended. “Peace” became a Swedish-like part of the new national identity. During my time, our propaganda about UNESCO was so successful that thousands of UNESCO clubs were organized as part of a peace movement. In 1951 Paris, I witnessed the ceremony welcoming Japan as a new member. Dr. George Stoddard, with whom I had worked when he presided over the US Education Mission to Japan, represented the US UNESCO in Japan’s first UN organization after World War II.

Japan’s economic miracle had historical roots in the Occupation. American responsibility for Japan’s defense also saved a lot of money for the Japanese who, in turn, let us continue to station troops. In 2012, with a new buildup of military forces in Asia and the Pacific, these postwar arrangements continue to help balance power with China.

Alex Gibney’s documentary, *The Pacific Century*, includes interviews with SCAP officials reflecting on the goals and achievements of the Occupation. To their views, I wish to celebrate the globalization of Japanese aesthetics, an unanticipated consequence of culture contact. American superpower status helped further disseminate Japanese influences on American architecture, fashion, video games, food, comics, and science fiction. Oh yes, and Zen meditation.

In 1945–48, I found Japan resonating with the colonial mood of E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*. After independence, both Japan and India are enduring new partners—old civilizations reinventing themselves. In the process, their experiments with democracy help Americans keep faithful to a tradition now menaced by greed, hate, fear, and religious literalism.

Daniel Métraux: *How did your time in Japan influence your later career?*

Wilton Dillon: My three years in Tokyo benefited my Smithsonian duties. For example, I invited Sociologist Michio Nagai, former minister of education, to chair the 1971 symposium published as *The Cultural Drama*. I also welcomed Japanese scholars to speak at the 2001 Margaret Mead Centennial Symposium, “The Interplay of Cultures: Whither the US in the World?” In 1954, I served as staff anthropologist for the Japan Society of New York.

Daniel Métraux: *Thank you so much for the interview.* ■