

Americanization of East Asia

By Warren I. Cohen

Some years ago, in the heyday of John King Fairbank, it was customary to think of change in East Asia, evidence of modernization, as a response to the West, as Westernization. Today that view is considered ethnocentric, a failure to recognize the internal drive of Asian peoples to transform their cultures. A few of us have taken a step further and written of the Asianization of the West—or at least of America. Nonetheless, some of the changes in the way people of East Asia live today can be blamed on or credited to the United States, its image in their minds, and the role the United States has played in their lives.

In the course of the last century, the United States had an impact on popular culture, education, religion, political, and economic thought and practices in most countries of East Asia. Contact between Asians and Americans changed the way the people of East Asia live—what they eat and drink, how they play and how they pray, how they are governed and how they dream of being governed. This impact was determined by Asians, who chose those elements of American culture that pleased them, often modifying them to suit local tastes, and ultimately indigenizing them. American efforts to *impose* cultural change, as in the Philippines, usually failed.

The American role in effecting cultural change in East Asia usually has been passive. The most obvious instances are when peoples of the region accept an image of America. They might perceive America as the freest society in the world, or the United States as the richest or most powerful or most modern nation, and try to determine what element in American life produces the desired result—and attempt to replicate it.

Similarly, Asian peoples might see aspects of American culture that strike them as more satisfying or entertaining than what their own cultures offer. They may enjoy *Dallas*, or *Bay Watch*, or *Little House on the Prairie* more than programs produced locally. Hundreds of thousands of young Japanese, craving a taste of New York nightlife, used to watch Fuji Television's weekly live broadcast from the Cheetah Club in Manhattan.¹ Until a few years ago, the only alternative to government-controlled TV in South Korea was the US Army channel, which offered American programming twenty-four



Two Chinese girls have a talk with an employee of Coca Cola dressed as Santa Claus on the Nanjing Road in Shanghai, December 23, 2005.

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hours a day—and young Koreans soaked up American popular culture, even as they demonstrated against the continued presence of American troops in Seoul.

People act freely to take what they please and adapt it in any way that seems useful to them. Their sense of national identity is not threatened: few feel less Chinese or Japanese, Korean, Thai, or Vietnamese. Historically, people have attempted to use alien ideas and technology to improve

their lives—without sacrificing their own values. Given that the United States was the world's leading power for most of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that American culture was attractive to much of the world—or that some people perceived Americanization as a threat to their traditions and their power. Cultural change is rarely without cost. It can be especially

painful for the more venerable members of a society who see their experience ignored and their traditions rejected by grandchildren.

American political and social practices attracted Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese intellectuals in the closing years of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth. Akira Iriye and Carol Gluck have pointed to the interest of Japanese in imagined American anti-imperialism, the vitality of American life, and the place of women in American society. Chinese officials visiting the United States in the last decades of the Qing were tremendously impressed by the level of industrialization they found, and suspected that American institutions and values contributed to the country's economic progress. Chinese reformers and revolutionaries early in the twentieth century saw the American political system as the appropriate model for a post-Qing China. Sun Yat-sen's economic theories were heavily influenced by the writings of Henry George. And some Chinese gained their sense of nationalism and national symbols—flags and patriotic hymns—from American missionaries.²

Korean and Vietnamese intellectuals—including Ho Chi Minh—admired the American Declaration of Independence, constitution, and political philosophy. Across East Asia, in China, Japan, Korea, and Indochina, in the early years of the twentieth century, men and women seeking to lead their people to liberty, prosperity, and greater repute looked to the United States as a model. After Europe was discredited by World War I, many people in Asia,

inspired by Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points, were energized by his call for self-determination, however little it actually accomplished.

Although self-determination for the people of China and Korea was not a high priority for Japanese leaders, many Japanese were enamored of American culture in the 1920s, and an enormous literature introducing the United States was published in Japan. Industrialists were quick to adopt the scientific management principles of Frederick Winslow Taylor, the American “efficiency” expert. A Japanese publisher produced a magazine in the style of the *Saturday Evening Post*, and another published a Japanese version of the *Harvard Classics*. They were creating a mass culture from American institutions and practices by adapting them for local consumption.

American culture also proved attractive to Chinese who were disillusioned with traditional approaches to political and social problems. Guo Moruo, who was to become a Chinese Communist cultural icon, was radicalized, according to his biographer, David Roy, by reading Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*. Cai Yuanpei, the leading educator of his time, invited John Dewey to Beijing and introduced him as a “greater thinker than Confucius.” Paul Cohen contends that Hu Shi, the prominent liberal intellectual of the 1920s, conceived of the science and democracy he wanted for China in “distinctly Deweyan, not generically Western” terms.

The image of the United States as representative of freedom, power, and wealth grew enormously after WWII. American mass culture became the rage wherever people had access to it. Wherever possible, the young wore blue jeans, and Coca Cola was the drink of choice. Generations of teenagers in Japan and more recently China used jeans and Cokes to demonstrate their alienation from local adult culture. Perhaps more surprising is the success of Starbucks in tea-drinking cultures. Less surprising is the attraction of American music—jazz since the 1920s, later rock and roll, and even rap. In Japan, aging sumo wrestlers become rap stars. Gospel singing swept Japan after Whoopi Goldberg’s *Sister Act* played there—and a workshop for Japanese gospel singers opened in Harlem in 1998.

Japanese visual arts—painting, printmaking, and photography—were also influenced by interaction with Americans, although not always in the direction of Americanization. American Ernest Fenollosa, the foremost authority on Japanese art at the beginning of the twentieth century, persuaded Japanese painters that wealthy American collectors were eager to buy *traditional* paintings and urged them to ignore modern international styles and paint for the market. Similarly, the interest of American collectors, such as James Michener and Oliver Statler, rekindled Japanese interest in printmaking.



Yao Ming playing for the Shanghai Sharks in the basketball match against Bayi Rockets, January 19th, 2001.

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After WWII, nontraditional artists from Taiwan often studied or went to live in the United States, as did most members of the Fifth Moon Group, an extraordinary band of painters led by Liu Kuo-sung. American influence was not possible on the mainland until 1979, when Joan Lebold Cohen’s lectures on modern American art and her slides featuring the work of painters such as Jackson Pollack and Willem de Kooning exhilarated young Chinese artists. Some, seeking artistic freedom still constrained in the People’s Republic, have left for the United States and Europe. Others have compromised with the authorities by painting in the style of Andrew Wyeth, whose New England realism is more acceptable to cadres raised on Soviet socialist realism.

Probably the most popular part of American culture in China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan is sports, specifically basketball and baseball. At one point in the 1990s, Michael Jordan was the world’s most popular figure among young Chinese. Today, Yao Ming, the 7’6” star of the Shanghai Sharks, now playing for the Dallas Mavericks in the NBA, is an icon in both China

and the United States. In Tokyo, there was a place called “Hooptown Harajuku,” where, for sixty dollars an hour, six Japanese could imagine they were American inner-city athletes, playing three-on-three, on an asphalt basketball court, covered with graffiti provided by the owner, and surrounded by a chain link fence, just like in New York City.³

Anyone who has followed Little League baseball championships is aware of the prominence of teams from Taiwan, where it was introduced first by the Japanese, suppressed by the Guomindang after WWII, and revived by the American military in the 1950s. The Korean experience was similar. Baseball is now second only to soccer in popularity in Korea and likely to take over first place after the Koreans defeated the American team in the World Baseball Classic in 2006. The country has become competitive in international basketball competition as well.

Of course the Japanese have made baseball *their* national pastime, while Americans have chosen to shift their affections to sports incorporating more body contact. Baseball in Japan goes back to the Meiji era and has been played professionally since 1935, but it is intercollegiate baseball that is the country’s major sport. The game is played differently in Japan, so much so that American ballplayers have had great difficulty adapting. Nonetheless, Japan has been exporting players to the United States in recent years.

Two other examples of American popular culture freely and happily received by Japanese and other East Asians—to the disgust of many intellectuals all over the world—are Disneyland and

McDonald's. Scholars who have studied Disneyland in Tokyo and Hong Kong are struck by the way the owners modified their product to suit Japanese and Chinese taste. The Tokyo version initially served only Western food, but visitors demanded and are now offered sushi, tempura, and curry as well. The Hong Kong owners learned from the Japanese experience and served Chinese fare from the beginning—and are now under attack from animal rights groups for serving the Cantonese delicacy, shark's fin soup. Asians get a Japanese or Chinese version of America, sanitized and idealized. Many Japanese children, growing up with a Japanese-speaking Mickey Mouse, think America's favorite rodent is Japanese. This pattern of Asians in control, reshaping or imagining American cultural artifacts to be their own, is repeated endlessly throughout Asia.

And then there is McDonald's, *Golden Arches East*, as James L. Watson titled his delightful book. His subsequent data indicated that the number of McDonald's in the region had doubled between 1995 and 1996 and has probably quadrupled in the decade since. There are more than 3,000 in Japan alone, hundreds in China, as many as 2,000 more elsewhere in East Asia. McDonald's is different in the various parts of the region as the franchisees cater to local preferences.

Parents in East Asia view McDonald's as a safe place for their children to hang out. Women in Japan and Korea find it a comfortable place to meet without men and alcohol. Throughout China, McDonald's has become the place of choice for children's birthday parties. And there is a growing tendency throughout the area to perceive McDonald's as local rather than American. There are many stories of Asian children traveling anxiously in the United States, relieved by the sight of the Golden Arches, the realization that their "native" food was available in America.

A further example of East Asians looking to an image of the United States to chart their course can be found in the immigration policies of the new nation-states that emerged in Southeast Asia in the 1950s. What were they to do with the Chinese who flocked to their shores or the Indians the British left behind? Wang Gungwu wrote that the idea of the melting pot in America was influential. Believing that assimilation had worked in the United States, Southeast Asian governments incorporated the American model into their programs.⁴

Before examining instances in which the US government attempted to shape the culture of Asian people along lines consistent with American values and tastes, it is useful to consider the role of American Protestant missionaries in China and Korea. They were important in Japan as well, but primarily in the nineteenth century, when they contributed to Meiji-era efforts toward modernization. As Paul Cohen has demonstrated, the impact of the missionaries was subversive. They came intending to change indigenous cultures by having the people among whom they preached abandon their traditional gods and forms of worship. In China and Korea, they attacked the Confucian underpinnings of the existing social order. Their converts in China were few, but they contributed enormously to changing and modernizing the country. In Korea, Christianity has taken



Jeffrey Schwartz (third right), Chief Executive Officer of McDonald's China and other officials during the opening ceremony of McDonald's first drive-thru outlet in Shanghai, also the second drive-thru outlet in China, January 12, 2006.

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root, largely under the leadership of native Christians, but American Protestant missionaries also had an impact on Korean culture, not least when Korea was part of the Japanese empire. Even Kim Il Sung's mother was a Christian.⁵

The missionary effort in Korea was predominantly American, and its earliest impact was in furthering Korea's modernization and encouraging patriotic resistance to the Japanese occupiers. Americans, most notably Dr. Horace Allen, contributed to the development of Western-style education and medical practices in Korea. Young progressive Korean aristocrats, associating Christianity with America, looked to the missionaries for solutions to problems of national development—and received advice on constructing railroads, waterworks, power stations, and communication facilities, the basic infrastructure required for industrialization.

In China, Americans were probably never a majority among Protestant missionaries and the largest single group for only a few years, but their contribution to China's modernization was striking. The centerpiece of the American effort was the Christian colleges, described by Jessie Lutz as mediators of Western civilization and training grounds for anti-imperialist nationalists. Young Chinese, disdainful of their country's traditional culture, found alternatives in these colleges—without becoming Christians. Graduates met the state's need for teachers, educational planners, and administrators in the 1930s, and some continued in these roles after the establishment of the People's Republic.

Quite early in the missionary encounter with China, medical services and education were perceived as a means of overcoming resistance to the missionary presence. Shortly after WWI, however, the missionary medical effort was overshadowed by a major Rockefeller Foundation program to establish "scientific medicine" in China, leading to the creation of the Peking Union Medical College, which recruited an international faculty of exceptional quality. Its graduates were too few to meet the needs of hundreds of millions of Chinese in the countryside, but they made important contributions to medical knowledge, succeeding in attacks on several diseases endemic in China. They dominated medical school faculties and health bureaucracies not only in late Republican China but in the PRC as well, until the Cultural Revolution.

Finally there are cases of forced Americanization, such as President William McKinley's acceptance of the "White Man's burden" to civilize the Philippines. After killing hundreds of thousands of Filipinos in the process of occupying the islands, the Americans set out to remold their society, to create a liberal democratic society modeled on the United States. Glenn Anthony May calls the American occupation an "experiment in self-duplication." The experiment failed. Americans did not create a liberal democracy in the Philippines. They did not instill the Filipinos with American political culture. "People Power" and Cory Aquino have come and gone but the wretchedness of life persists on the islands.

Americanization failed because the Filipinos were not empty vessels eager to be filled with American values. There was an

indigenous Malay culture with an overlay of Spanish indoctrination. Moreover, the Americans were inexperienced colonial rulers, unsure of their methods. They had little understanding of the needs of peasants or the poor in the barrios. The US Congress had little interest in the economic development of the islands and blocked potentially useful programs. When American officials attempted to carry out reforms, they were obstructed by the Filipino elite with whom they had allied. The Americans did not plunder the islands, but they failed to contain the avarice of the native oligarchy to which they handed the administration of policy.

Filipino popular culture was unquestionably Americanized. In Manila in particular and wherever the American military established bases, cultural life was dominated by American movies, music, and dances, often rehashed in Tagalog. Filipinos learned to play baseball and to worship movie stars and basketball players. The phrase used to describe the process is “Three hundred years in a Spanish convent and forty years in Hollywood have left Filipinos culturally dispossessed.”⁶ In the foreseeable future, it is unlikely that the American impact will give way to something more pleasing to cultural nationalists. It is equally unlikely that the oligarchs will allow a New Deal for the Filipino people. In sum, the encounter with the United States did little for Filipino society or culture.

Forced Americanization has had one great success, the occupation of Japan as analyzed by John Dower. The Americans who went to occupy Japan in 1945 were a very different people with a culture very different from those who arrived in Manila at the beginning of the century. They were no less committed to transforming the target country into a duplicate of their own, into a liberal democracy, but the New Deal era had changed the American conception of what such a society should be and of the government’s role in shaping it.

Of greater importance was the fact that the Japanese of 1945 were very different from the Filipinos of 1900. They were the most “modern” of Asian peoples and they perceived in defeat that something was wrong with their culture. The victors had demonstrated the superiority of their culture. Most ordinary Japanese were ready to be Americanized.

Americanization was not, however, what the Japanese political elite had in mind. Japanese civilian leaders were appalled by the idea of democracy for Japan, objected to the removal of political, civil, and religious liberty restrictions—and despised American popular culture. As in the Philippines, American occupation authorities concluded it was expedient to work through the indigenous elite, but the results were very different. Before they returned control to the local elite, the Americans carried out reforms and forced upon them a new constitution that together shattered old authoritarian structures and made reversal impossible. They carried out successful land reform, strengthened the unions, advanced the rights of women, and provided for a free press. These were radical changes and there was enormous support for them among a politically mobile people who were able to retain these new rights and privileges. Most students of the occupation credit the American-crafted constitution for protecting the rights the occupation gave the Japanese people. Amending it was difficult. However much they complain about the loss of “Japaneseness,” conservatives have not been able to discard it. As Dower has argued, “Postwar Japan was a vastly freer and more egalitarian nation than imperial Japan had been.”⁷

In terms of popular culture, those who love traditional Japanese art, music, and theater argue that the Japanese who matured after the

occupation lost something. In the 1950s, the most admired entertainer in Japan was Elvis Presley, followed by other American top 40 performers heard on Armed Forces Radio. Japanese affection for Hollywood movies, ice cream, Disneyland, and McDonald’s saddens some observers of Japan, but we must remember what the Japanese gained as part of their Americanization: the right to think critically, to read what they want, to choose what mix of cultures they please. Obviously, they think the price is right.

More recently, democracy has evolved in Taiwan and South Korea. American pressures on autocratic leaders failed in both countries until the 1980s. Faced with abandonment by the United States in the 1980s, Taiwan’s ruler perceived the move toward democracy as the best hope of salvaging the island’s freedom. Taiwan’s first democratically elected president, Lee Teng-hui, boasted that he had more American PhDs in his cabinet than any American president. Democracy came to Korea largely because the Korean people could no longer tolerate the corruption and brutality of their military leaders. The American ambassador left no doubt as to American support for a democratic revolution if the military did not go quietly. Despite the anti-Americanism of many Korean demonstrators, the United States contributed mightily to their success.

It is evident that much of East Asia’s political, economic, and popular culture was affected by the rise of American power and presence in the region. Globalization has a distinctly American flavor. Certainly for China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, as well as the Philippines, the United States is the center of the world.

Those American-flavored changes in East Asia have and will endure as a matter of choice. East Asian countries were not doormats. Their people were not passive, helpless victims of American cultural imperialism. They or their leaders manipulated Americans as best they could, and selected those parts of American culture they believed would improve the quality of their lives. They changed the ingredients to suit their own taste. Americanization, to the extent that it occurred, happened because the peoples of East Asia wanted it, and more often than not, it took place in the form of their choice. ■

NOTES

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4. Wang Gungwu, *The Chinese Overseas: From Earthbound China to the Quest for Autonomy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 94.
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