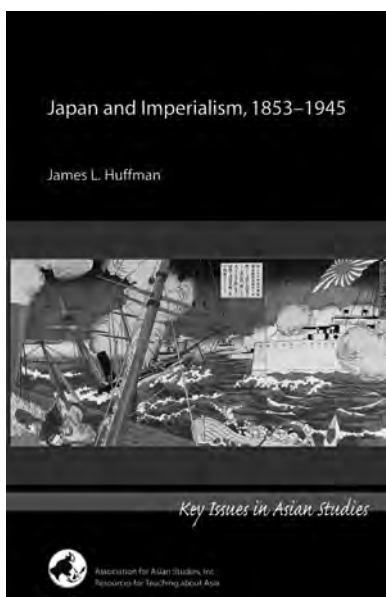


## Japan and Imperialism, 1853–1945

Key Issues in Asian Studies (KIAS) booklets complement Education About Asia and are practical teaching resources for college, university, and senior high school teachers and students. James L. Huffman is H. Orth Hirt Professor of History Emeritus at Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio, where he taught East Asian history for thirty years. A former journalist, he also has taught at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Indiana Wesleyan University, and Dartmouth College. He is the author of seven books on Japanese history, including *Japan and World History* (Oxford University, 2010), *Creating a Public: People and Press in Meiji Japan* (University of Hawai'i, 1997), and *Modern Japan: A History in Documents* (Oxford University, second edition, 2011). He now resides in



Chicago, where he is working on a study of the daily lives of Japanese commoners in the early twentieth century.

**Lucien:** *Jim, many of our readers are responsible for world history courses and, arguably, content selection is the most critical of all issues for instructors in this discipline. Given limited classroom time what are some reasons, in your opinion, why the topic of your booklet is especially important?*

**Jim Huffman:** There is little question that imperialism—its specific programs and policies as well as its aftermath—shook the nineteenth and twentieth century world like few other forces. Imperialism brought peoples around the globe into contact with one another. It disrupted local development and introduced inequalities, creating new elites and impoverishing other groups. It stimulated nationalism in countries both small and large. It left legacies of anger, inequity, and development that continue to shape national systems even today. Its impact on the world order—sometimes for good, often for bad—cannot be overestimated.

It seems to me that the chief value of *Japan and Imperialism* lies in the fact that it presents one specific Asian country's overall experience with imperialism in brief, readable, narrative fashion. While Western imperialism has been widely studied, few if any student-oriented works have focused on its East Asian counterpart. I would call particular attention to three contributions that the booklet makes. For those interested specifically in East Asia or Japan, it surveys Japan's imperialist experiences across a full century, beginning with the arrival of Western navies in the mid-1800s and ending with the dismantling of Japan's empire in 1945. For those with a Western or world bent, the booklet introduces comparative features of imperialism and colonialism that have been largely neglected in other studies. And for everyone, the work highlights *both sides* of the imperialist experience: that of the victim, when Japan's nineteenth-century leaders feared that their country might be colonized, and that of the victimizer, when Japan later became a colonial overseer itself.

One additional comment about the second point: An advantage of studying Japanese imperialism is that it provides a framework for comparing and contrasting the universal forces that undergirded imperialism with the system's specifically cultural or national features. Japan's imperi-

alism was, in most respects, very much like that of the Western powers. At the same time, it was distinctive and different—in ways that should raise frequent opportunities for classroom discussion.

**Lucien:** *In working with you on the booklet, I was impressed with the variety of Japanese voices that you integrated into the story of Japan's transition from being the object of foreign powers' designs to becoming an imperial power. This approach is usually of intrinsic interest to readers, but how else does this penchant of yours for inclusion of diverse people and opinions cultivate better historical understanding?*

**Jim Huffman:** Thanks for noticing! That feature speaks to my understanding of history. I feel strongly that history is the study of the *entire* past—especially the human past—not just of governments, or of the rich and the elites. The old cliché, that we focused on elites because they influenced everyone else, just does not hold up. My late wife Judith once shared with me a poem by a Filipino worker Mariya who complained that while she and women like her had been “pressed into the service” of their families and nations, they “scarcely, nay rarely” appeared in their country's history. That gap ought to shame us as historians.

The imperialist story may include the decisions and acts of industrial kingpins and national leaders. But it also encompasses the struggles of Ashio miners, the military service of Tōhoku farm boys, and the work of emigrant Japanese women in Hawai'i's sugar plantations. The *people* fought the wars, shouted the nationalist (and sometime anti-war) slogans, drank the German beer, and tilled the soil of Manchurian farms. Their story is central to the imperialist tale.

This doesn't mean that one should overlook the traditional themes of history. Indeed, the narrative centers here, as in most works, on the initiatives of states and leaders and developing imperial policies. It simply means that the traditional account has for too long been unbalanced; it needs to be filled out by the work, attitudes, and experiences of everyone who made up the societies of both colonizers and colonies.

I should add that I have not always told the commoners' stories as well or as fully as I wish I had, sometimes because of the difficulty of finding

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sources, sometimes because of the lack of space. But I have made an effort in that direction. My hope is that students will see, concretely, that the imperialist story involved everyone.

**Lucien:** *What advice do you have for EAA readers who have expertise in Asia and are interested in developing KIAS booklets or other pedagogical materials for broad audiences?*

**Jim Huffman:** My first piece of advice is simple: Do it! Don't worry about whether you are "expert" enough, or whether others share your particular interest. If you have a topic, think seriously about making a contribution.

After having said that, I want to make three other points.

First, classroom instructors should remember that they have a clearer sense than anyone else of what things need to be made available—and in what form—for undergraduate and secondary students. The specialists usually know less about the practical needs of the everyday student than the teacher-on-the-ground does.

Second, anyone with an idea should discuss it with colleagues and get in touch with you as the KIAS editor. You know the series, know what is in the pipeline, and give excellent direction. As an editor, you are also wonderfully approachable.

Third, remember when taking on this kind of project that writing something short is at least as demanding as writing something long. I have found concise history the hardest of all to write, because one needs to be comprehensive, readable, and interesting—and to be so *in a few words*. Indeed, my first draft of each chapter in this work typically was twice as long as the manuscript that I eventually submitted. The process sometimes is excruciating, but it also is exhilarating and satisfying.

**Lucien:** *Thanks for the interview, Jim.* ■

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