Japan Through History

Professor Akira Iriye is one of the world's foremost scholars of Japanese-American relations. A graduate of the Seikei High School in Tokyo (1953), Haverford College (B.A. 1957), and Harvard University (Ph.D. 1961), Professor Iriye has taught in France, Great Britain, Japan, and the United States. As the attached bibliography makes clear, he has written or edited seventeen books in Japanese and English (with Dutch and Korean translations), all of which deal with the tangled relationships between the great powers in Asia from the late nineteenth century to the present. President of the American Historical Association in 1988 and the winner of several prizes for his path-breaking work on how different nations view both their own security and each other, Professor Iriye is currently the Charles Warren Professor of American History at Harvard University. He recently discussed his thoughts on how to think about the U.S.-Japan relationship with *EAA* Associate Editor Peter Frost.

FROST: *Professor Iriye, while I realize the difficulties of condensing a sophisticated analysis into a short interview, I wonder if you could briefly discuss the suggestion you made in your book,* China and Japan in the Global Setting, *(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) that we teachers might think of Japanese foreign relations in terms of "power" prior to World War I, "culture" in the inter-war period, and "economics" after World War II. What, for example, do you mean by power, and why did you say that this concept provides the most useful way of thinking about Japan's international relations from the late nineteenth century to World War I?*

IRIYE

While I am still revising some of my ideas on this since writing that book and so whatever I say is still rather tentative, by "power" I mean quite simply a country's ability to fight a war—military force plus whatever other material and human resources are mobilized in fighting. I think that this concept provides a key to understanding Japanese foreign relations in this period because the leaders (and the bulk of the people, presumably) were convinced that the country had to safeguard its independence and to acquire the status of a great power by going to war or being willing to do so. Japan was, of course, not exceptional. Every great power viewed international relations in such a great power way; the European states had been doing this since at least the seventeenth century.

FROST: *What about the period between the two world wars? Why, in a period that saw the Great Depression and Japan's expansion into Asia, do you feel that "culture" is now a key concept?*

IRIYE

Although power never disappears from Japanese foreign relations, I believe that it would be wrong to treat the whole period from the 1850s to the 1940s or the 1990s as if that were all there was to the story. We have to understand that a country's foreign affairs change as both it and the world changes. My argument in all my recent books is that in the 1920s, something does happen both in the world and in Japan, as cultural forces assert themselves. By "cultural forces," I mean non-state initiatives by individuals and organizations, activities that I call "cultural internationalism," as well as ideas and movements away from a power-political

(or geopolitical) definition of international affairs. Whereas power is embodied in the state (government, armed forces), these kinds of cultural forces belong in the realm of society. To the extent that society gains its autonomy vis-à-vis the state, cultural forces come to play more influential roles in the country's history.

In the 1920s, even though the power-level interaction was never absent, the cultural interaction would seem to have been more notable. As scholars such as Joshua Fogel have made clear, China and Japan had student exchanges, visits by literary figures, language study, and other types of attempts at mutual understanding.

After 1931, Japan reverted to a primarily power definition of its foreign affairs; in a sense it reverts to the Meiji stress on armed strength and war as indicators of national greatness. At the same time, the Japanese never gave up their fascination with cultural relations, except that in the 1930s, culture was made to serve power, i.e. education, literature, and other kinds of cultural propaganda were employed to support the war effort. Some argue, and there is some sense to it, that if Japan had stuck to a purely power definition of its strategy, it would not have been so stupid as to go to war first against China and then against the U.S. and others. It was their cultural arrogance that made them think that they could wage a war against China and the decadent West.

FROST: *How about the postwar period? Given the explosive growth of the Japanese economy and the contentious trade issues that have arisen, economics surely is a key issue. But doesn't an emphasis on economics run the danger of downplaying such general Cold War issues as the rise of Mao Zedong and the impact of the Korean and Vietnam wars?*

IRIYE

In the post-1945 period, especially during 1945–70, we could say that China and Japan interacted not as powers or as cultures, but as economies. In other words, here I am viewing a nation as an economic entity. It would be possible to view economics as an aspect of power or of culture, but in that 1992 book, I wanted to see if it made sense to separate out economics as a separate category. I still think that it makes sense to say that postwar Japan has defined its identity and foreign policy primarily in the economic framework. I am not saying that Mao's ideology can be ignored. Of course not, but at least in explaining Japanese behavior, it would be possible to say that it was economic considerations that underlay Japan's policy of separating economics from politics, thus downplaying Maoist ideology in dealing with the People's Republic of China.

Similarly, U.S.-Japan relations have been just as influenced by economics. One cannot ignore the non-economic aspects of the debate concerning the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty, but even that treaty, I would argue, meant for the Japanese primarily a U.S. protective umbrella under which they were free to trade with whomever was willing to trade with them. This emphasis on economics and trade also explains Japan's role in the Korean and Vietnam wars.

FROST: *In more recent years, trade has been a highly contentious issue between our two countries. Do you think that we are through the worst of the trade disputes? Are we perhaps headed towards some new era in which a new organizing theme will be called for?*

IRIYE

That the trade dispute came to dominate U.S.-Japan relations is hardly surprising. Because of its single-minded devotion to trade, Japan had no effective response when the U.S. sought to persuade (force) Japan to alter its ways, to do more for security, to transform itself, etc. Although right now the U.S. economy is doing so well that the tensions have temporarily subsided, this situation will last as long as Japan holds on to its economics-oriented foreign policy. Some Japanese are once again saying, let's stress defense and national power, but I don't think that these concepts will be popular with either the Japanese public or the Asian neighbors.

FROST: *How well do you think we Americans understand the trade issue? Do you feel that the debate between the so-called "Chrysanthemum Clubbers" (those sympathetic to Japanese positions) and the "Japan Bashers" has helped us reach some sort of consensus about that country?*

IRIYE

I think that it is unfortunate that journalists have sensationalized the division among American specialists on Japan by calling the two sides the Chrysanthemum Clubbers and Japan Bashers. I do feel that more and more American specialists on Japan have become less and less tolerant of Japan's trade practices because they see them as but one aspect of Japan's insular mentality. Ivan Hall's latest book, *Cartels of the Mind: Japan's Intellectual Closed Shop* (New York: Norton, 1998), shows how as knowledgeable a student of Japan as he, with no ideological preconceptions, has felt exasperated by the situation. At bottom is what I would call Japan's *ikkoku bunka shūgi* (the idea of cultural uniqueness). The Japanese are also accused of having held on to the postwar illusion of *ikkoku heiwa shūgi* (literally, one-country pacifism), the idea that they can remain at peace while the rest of the world is going to pieces, but I think that this idea is more defensible than the idea that they are culturally unique.

FROST: *Has there been a similar kind of debate among Japanese intellectuals?*

IRIYE
Japanese intellectuals seem to have been rather defensive lately, being attacked from all sides, by the U.S. on trade issues and by China and other Asian countries for their failure to reckon with the aggressive past. Both these criticisms come down to the same thing that I mentioned above, cultural insularity. It is too bad that so many Japanese intellectuals have turned, if anything, even more insular in the face of these attacks. One hopeful sign is that among the younger intellectuals, I see some evidence of their willingness to transcend cultural nationalism and an insular mentality.

FROST: *Since all this is so hard to summarize in a brief interview, perhaps I could end by asking you if you have suggestions for what we teachers should be doing, both at the K-12 level and in higher education, to further discussion of these complex issues.*

IRIYE
I have long been involved in the work of the National Council for History Education (26915 Westwood Rd., Suite B-2, Westlake, OH 44145-4656), and I am deeply impressed that in many parts of the United States, school teachers are eagerly promoting world history curricula. I applaud their efforts to get their students to think of the history of the world, not just their own country, in order to understand the present. While I am in no better position than anyone else to offer constructive suggestions, I do hope that we professional historians (or scholars in other fields) can continue to maintain our standards without making any political compromise and also communicate with our colleagues abroad.

I come back to the theme of cultural internationalism that I discuss in my 1997 work, *Cultural Internationalism and the World Order* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Unless intellectuals can communicate across national boundaries and cooperate in strengthening forces of free inquiry, the world will not be able to look to a promising new century.

FROST: *Thank you!* ■

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