

Pearl Harbor and Pan-Asianism

TEACHING IDEOLOGY AS HISTORY

By Michael A. Schneider

“So, Why Did the Japanese Attack Pearl Harbor?”

This question, however fraught with oversimplification we may find it, is still a great one for inspiring students to study history. It tantalizes novices with the possibility of a singular answer. Defying an easy solution, it teaches stern lessons to advanced students about the necessity of deploying multiple and overlapping layers when building historical explanations. It is also a question that continues to fire popular imagination. First, there is the brazenness and apparent foolishness of the attack. Moreover, the outrage over Japanese perfidy has transmuted, in the minds of conspiracy theorists, into a suspicion that perfidious American officials must have invited a Japanese attack as a pretext for entering World War II in Europe. In the US, these controversies have held still-wider salience. The depths of American unpreparedness at Pearl Harbor have haunted Americans' sense of security ever since; the apparition of “a second Pearl Harbor” still lurks in our foreign policy debates. Unpacking these complex layers can leave even the most diligent student asking plaintively, “So, why did the Japanese attack?” This essay proposes to take student bewilderment as an opportunity. Analyzing the Japanese decision for war can be an excellent opportunity to demonstrate the power of ideology in shaping the course of history. “Ideology” refers to any organized set of beliefs that provides explanations for how the world works. In practice, ideology serves as a kind of mortar, holding together disparate beliefs we have about the world and making sense of our actions within it. Understanding historical actors' ideology can help us appreciate the leaps and gaps in their worldviews that we may find so baffling. In the years leading up to Pearl Harbor, Pan-Asianist ideology was ascendant in Japan. Pan-Asianism espouses the principle of a fundamental unity among all Asians and often presupposes a prominent role for Japan in leading an Asian renaissance. Thinking through the Pearl Harbor attack as a Japanese attempt to implement Pan-Asianist ideology is one way to highlight features in the Pearl Harbor narrative that American students tend to overlook.

Ideology does not often receive enough attention in our historical explanations. One can see this effect at Pearl Harbor itself. In April 2011, the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies in Honolulu presented many Asian specialists with their first opportunity to view the new interpretative

exhibits at the site. For many decades, a visit to Pearl Harbor meant a pilgrimage to the USS Arizona Memorial. Today, the site has been newly incorporated into the improbably large World War II Valor in the Pacific National Monument, which stretches from Hawai'i to Alaska to California, casting Japan's military aggression as a broader story of the Americas, including the incarceration of West

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Coast Japanese and Japanese-Americans. Dedicated in December 2010, the new park's exhibits ambitiously aim to tell “both sides” of the story. The exhibits deserve a fuller appreciation than can be accomplished here. They succeed on many fronts, despite a few glaring errors. The Japanese side of the story is a pastiche, relying on the decades-old characterization of 1930s Japanese society as a bundle of contradictions. However much had been added to the Japanese part of the narrative, interpretative gaps and an overall lack of cohesion in depicting Japanese motives remains. This cohesion might have been achieved were it not for the almost complete absence of Pan-Asianist ideology in the presentation.

I do not intend to minimize the perennial and daunting challenge of depicting ideology in public museum space. The opacity, limitations, and contradictions of Pan-Asianist thought have not made the problem of depicting it any easier. Pan-Asianist ideology has been mind-numbingly diverse. Too often, the contradictory nature of Pan-Asianist thought has been enough to dismiss it. Ideology, however, can smooth complexity, hold contradiction together, and bridge the inevitable mismatch between social theory and social reality. This essay proposes to examine a single Pan-Asianist text closely. In the process, I will identify key themes in Pan-Asianist ideology that tend to be downplayed in conventional American surveys of the events leading to Pearl Harbor. By helping students appreciate that these themes animated Japanese decision makers, students may be less inclined to follow the path to exasperation.

Pan-Asianism: A Short History

Pan-Asianists have argued that inspiring Pan-Asian unity is the key to the eventual liberation of Asia from the political, economic, and cultural domination of Asia since the nineteenth century. At the core of their agenda has been the presumption of Asian brotherhood. Pan-Asianist theorists have struggled to define the exact source of this brotherhood. For turn-of-the-century thinkers such as the Japanese art historian Okakura Tenshin or Indian poet Rabinandhrath Tagore, Asia was infused with a spirit that could inspire its peoples to transcend their parochial divisions. Other thinkers pointed to common cultural values, owing to the long reach of Chinese civilization or Buddhism. Under the influence of Social Darwinist thought in the late nineteenth century, race became a common ingredient in Pan-Asianist thought.¹ These struggles to locate the exact source of Asian unity demonstrate the considerable degree to which Pan-Asianism has been an ideology defined reactively and negatively. It emerged in opposition to imperialist intrusion of “the West,” that is, European and American colonialism in Asia. Finally, Pan-Asian thinkers have invariably looked to Japan for leadership. Many nationalistic leaders, who would oppose Japanese policies in Asia, first learned of modernization’s power by observing Japan’s experience. If a rebirth and renovation of Asia could be achieved, Japan’s modernization served as a model for other Asian societies and, for some, justification for Japan to take a leading role in bringing about that rebirth.

A common thread in Pan-Asianist thought in Japan argued that Asia should be remade in Japan’s image. Pan-Asianism, however, has just as often included criticism of Japan’s modernization and sought to remake Japanese society through the process of engineering an Asian renaissance. Japanese Pan-Asianists, thereby, found themselves to be marginal, even subversive, elements in their own society. Japanese territorial expansion on the Asian continent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries complicated this position further. Japan, after all, was supposed to be leading an Asian renaissance, not occupying Asia as the Western powers did. However, no event in this era did more to promote the vision of Japanese leadership than Japan’s defeat of Russia in 1905. Japan’s victory inspired pride among political activists throughout Asia, Africa, and the Middle East and turned Japan into a rendezvous point for nationalists and Pan-Asianists. More fundamentally, in shaking the foundations of supposed “white” superiority, the war allowed proponents of Pan-Asian unity, as well as those who feared it, to theorize more openly about an emerging global clash between “yellow” and “white” races.

The rise of internationalist thought after World War I ignited important changes in the main strands of Pan-Asianist thought that would lead to Pearl Harbor. Where earlier Pan-Asianists might have been internationally minded, cosmopolitan, and even liberal democrats, after 1919, Pan-Asianism in Japan became firmly planted as a right-wing, even radical, nationalist ideology, animated by virulent criticism of the West. This shift emerged through criticisms of the liberal internationalist postwar order, including the League of Nations, which critics saw as nothing more than a vehicle of the status quo dominated by privileged “white states.” The failure to include a so-called “racial-equality proposal” in the Treaty of Versailles, and the subsequent 1924 ban on Japanese immigration to the US fueled such criticisms. Once again, Pan-Asianism played the role of oppositional ideology to Japan’s official policy of international cooperation.

By the 1930s, full-throated Pan-Asianist views reached wide audiences. With their twin enemies of liberal internationalism and Marxist-Leninism, Pan-Asianist ideas motivated Japanese military leaders to pursue aggressive actions on the continent in the name of Asian unity. The key events of Japan’s war in Asia, including the Manchurian Incident of 1931; the construction of an East Asian economic regional bloc; the full-scale war in China in 1937; and Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro’s declaration of a “new order in Asia,” the puppet government of Wang Jingwei established in 1940; and the declaration of the Great East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere a few months before Pearl Harbor could all be seen as an official embrace of the Pan-Asianist ideology that had previously been subversive and marginal.

Pan-Asianism on the Eve of Pearl Harbor

A conventional Pearl Harbor narrative is likely to emphasize the way that Japan had effectively painted itself into a strategic corner by the autumn of 1941. Japan had waged war in China—first in Manchuria in 1931 and then all-out war after 1937—in order to construct a Pan-Asian union encompassing East

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Asia. Chinese resistance to Japan's Pan-Asianist dream had resulted in a military stalemate and attracted international condemnation of Japan's behavior. In 1940, Japan had further invited the enmity of the British and Americans by taking advantage of France's dire position in Europe to occupy French colonial territories in Southeast Asia. Japan was allied to Nazi Germany, which in turn had allied with the enemy Japanese leaders feared most, the Soviet Union, and then turned about to attack it in June 1941. Owing to its problems in China, Japan hesitated to join in the German campaign against the USSR. Instead, Japanese military leaders looked increasingly to the European colonized territories of Southeast Asia as a path to solving the China tangle. Any move there, however, would ignite a wider war.

Students should be encouraged to use English translations of Pan-Asianist texts as tools to decrypt Japanese responses to this strategic dilemma. Well-known documents depicting Japan's war in China as a "holy war" or official announcement of the Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere offer examples of the official cant that attempted to rationalize these policies.² Students should be equally aware that the official promotion of Pan-Asianist thought in wartime Japan was deeply conflicted in relation to these events. The most ardent proponents of Pan-Asian unity found Japan's military campaigning in Asia to be at odds with genuine unity among Asians. A truly radical Pan-Asianism would have to bring not only Western but also Japanese territorial aggression in East Asia to an end. Thus, Pan-Asian ideals circulated not only among political and military elites, but also among the bureaucrats, businessmen, and intellectuals who spread out across these newly occupied territories experimenting with how to integrate them into a zone of regional security.

By the late 1930s, military and civilian planners advocated for a new collective security organization to achieve these ideals. The document below presents one vision of such an organization, the East Asian League. Its author was Miyazaki Masayoshi (1893–1954), a minor bureaucrat who came to wield considerable influence over draft plans for Japan's wartime mobilization. Miyazaki was a Russia specialist and one of the few Japanese to witness the early stages of the Russian Revolution. During the

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1920s, he carried out a number of studies of the post-revolutionary Soviet economy. While certainly no Marxist, Miyazaki developed an appreciation for the role of state central planning for the economy. By the 1930s, Miyazaki was working closely with General Ishiwara Kanji, the architect of the Manchurian invasion in 1931. Both men envisioned an impending global confrontation between regional economic units and sought to mobilize Japan and Northeast Asia in preparation for that conflict. In this 1938 document, Miyazaki outlines some of the key motivations behind a new East Asian League.

Miyazaki Masayoshi, *Tōa Renmei Ron* [On the East Asian League]. Tokyo: Kaizōsha, 1938.³

The policy of an East Asian League means turning away from our emulation of European imperialist and colonial policies and eventually repudiating them. . . .

I cannot emphasize enough that, in abandoning our imperialist policies, our nation must not vacillate. Today, the desire to rationalize all of Japan's deeds has a strong grip over the nation. A posture of ruthlessly defending every one of our policies in the past, however, does not demonstrate the magnanimity of a great nation. Although our continental policy brought peace and prosperity to Korea and achieved a perfect merger of the Japanese and Korean peoples, we should not lose sight of the fact that we have lost supporters for our policies in East Asia. Japan must set out on its own course. It must reestablish a position of leadership in East Asia. For this reason, it is essential that we drive out any vestiges of imperialist thought remaining in our public discourse. As long as these attitudes persist in Japan, it will be difficult for East Asians to grasp the East Asian League framework, but moreover its policies will lose their moral force. In this sense, Japan, as the advocate for the League, must investigate the psyche of oppressed peoples thoroughly at every stage of the League's formulation. We must be ever mindful that the structure of the League not replace the system of Western exploitation with a system of Japanese oppression and must further be resolved not to give the impression that it will.

With the League taking as its goal the liberation of East Asian peoples, the right of political independence of liberated peoples must be guaranteed unconditionally. As Japan and its allies cooperate with the liberation movements of other East Asian peoples, it must be left to voluntary decision whether they join the League or whether they remain completely in-

dependent nations. . . . From the perspective of the development of national economies generally or from the perspective of the benefits for ordinary individuals, the fact is that it is advantageous to be part of a big nation or a big [regional] bloc. During this recent period of quasi-warfare among competing blocs, these advantages hold especially true for a small, weak country in the corner of East Asia. The historical significance of an East Asian League to East Asians could be most easily understood were Japan to adopt such a stance. . . .

[Miyazaki goes on to ascribe the oppressive race relations under European empires to the liberal, free trade ideology of the West.]

The white man's system of rule over East Asia was, at root, shot through with liberal thought. Those who think my words are extreme need look no further than the cases of natives of India, the Annamites of French Indochina, the blacks of South Africa or the present state of the blacks and native Indians of the United States. . . .

It is emotionally stunning to think back to the days before the Manchurian Incident [1931]—when a segment of the Japanese intelligentsia longed for free trade, held out hope for the potential of a global economy, and even advocated abandoning Manchuria—that the day had arrived when the thought and systems of Western liberalism held such potency that Japanese would abandon their own East Asian-ness. . . .

The establishment of an East Asian League is a comprehensive renovationist policy, combining the reorientation of our policy on the continent with the establishment of a new domestic order. Its renovationist character becomes increasingly clear, as evidenced by our comprehensive global policy through the Anti-Comintern Pact [concluded with Germany in 1936], and presents powerful testimony that Japan is entering a new epoch.

Teaching Pan-Asianism and Pearl Harbor

One can measure the currency of attitudes, such as Miyazaki's before Pearl Harbor, by the extent to which they flourished in the Japanese popular press in the immediate response to the attack. Commentator after commentator saw the new war against the US as providing intellectual and ethical clarity.⁴ Before Pearl Harbor, Japan's Pan-Asianist agenda was muddled and ambivalent. In their eyes, Pearl Harbor represented a chance to “enter a new epoch,” propelling Japan finally into conflict with the “right” enemy in defense of Asian unity. These claims were undeniably popular with the general public. Private letters and diaries, moreover, show that they increasingly persuaded even skeptics of Pan-Asianist ideology. Miyazaki's essay displays four themes that were recurrent in Japanese political and strategic thinking at the time and provided the ideological components of a decision for war with the US: anti-colonialism, regionalism, anti-Westernism, and Japanese leadership.

Anti-colonialism: It is important to remember that Hawai'i in 1941, from the Japanese perspective, was little more than an American military colony whose largest ethnic group was Japanese. Far from being sacred national territory of the US, Hawai'i was emblematic of everything that was wrong with the American presence in the Pacific: militarily aggressive and racially exclusionary. For thinkers like Miyazaki, rolling back Western-style colonialism could not simply result in a Japanese version of the same thing. Cultural and racial affinity among Asians could unite them without empire, so long as the Japanese did not adopt the attitudes of Western colonizers.

Regionalism: As the name of the proposed organization implies, the East Asian League meant to replace the League of Nations, which had failed to live up to its promises to promote international cooperation and equality of access. Instead, it protected vested interests and tenaciously defended the status quo, even if it was racist and exclusionary. Miyazaki devoted his career to building economic cooperation and integration that served the needs of East Asia. Again, the US advances in the Pacific looked to him as more a gambit to maintain the international status quo and thwart challenges to it, like an East Asian League.

Anti-Westernism: At the heart of these criticisms of the West's politics in Asia was a belief that this behavior reflected the most egregious failings of Western civilization. The oppressive race relations in the US or the exclusiveness with which the US dominated the Western hemisphere were not minor flaws. They expressed the hypocrisy at the root of Western thought. It was this view of Western thought as hopelessly compromised and hypocritical that fueled belief that the US and European powers would not strongly resist a quick-strike military incursion by Japan. The complementary notions of a critique of the West combined with a strategic assessment of the effectiveness of a quick Japanese offensive are the clearest ways that Japanese policymakers rationalized the decision to ignite a war with the US.

Japanese leadership: If, indeed, the Western states were selfish, aggressive, and territorially expansionist, it would naturally fall to Japan as the only non-Western great power to lead an Asian

renaissance. As Miyazaki points out, in a world of “quasi-warfare among competing blocs,” it is better to be part of a big group. It is interesting to note that both pragmatic and moral considerations factor into this calculation, here and elsewhere. The official announcement of the Greater East Asian Co-Pro-

perity Sphere in January 1941, for example, noted that Japan’s leadership of Asia had been accepted by international treaty (if only with Germany and Italy) while asserting that this leadership was a natural byproduct of each nation taking its “proper place” to create a “moral union.” As is well known,

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pragmatic imperatives would win out. Japanese primacy would crowd out any other considerations in constructing a regional system, scuttling any prospects for a genuine Asian union.

Taking Pan-Asianism Seriously

Having students draw out these four themes and apply them to Japan’s strategic dilemma in 1941 is an effective way to get students to place themselves in the Japanese position. There is no question that this approach faces significant points of resistance. American exceptionalism has a way of masking the legacies of the US’s colonial behavior and the broader imperial context for the US-Japan conflict. Japanese critiques of the West and their blithe dismissal of cherished liberal ideals can excite dismissive reactions. Since Japan’s imperialistic behavior was as bad—or even worse—than the imperialism Japan meant to supplant, it can be difficult for any of us to move past the rank hypocrisy in play.

There are significant benefits in taking Pan-Asianism more seriously. Emphasizing the colonial context of Asian politics is essential. In that context, the apparent recklessness and foolhardiness of Japanese behavior looks a little less so as one unpacks the ideological supports behind it. It is not sufficient to pass these ideas off as cheap rationalizations; ideology matters to understanding how people interpret their world and their motives. Finally, Pan-Asianists appreciated that issues of global economic integration and security had to be confronted head-on. They were correct that imperialism failed to address them; Pan-Asianism’s racial hierarchy was no better a solution. Our own struggles with globalization and its explosive consequences may confer a degree of credibility on their efforts to put these issues on the global agenda. ■

NOTES

1. Social Darwinism is an ideology that analyzes relations within and between societies in terms of competition among biological entities. Its biological view of a world of endless struggle had the effect of persuading people to attach genuine social and political significance to superficial racial differences. Despite its name, the ideology bears little relation to the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin.
2. These important documents, including most others discussed here, can be found in Sven Saaler and Christopher W.A. Szpilman, eds., *Pan-Asianism: A Documentary History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2011).
3. A more detailed biography and a longer version of this translation appear in Saaler and Szpilman, eds., *Pan-Asianism*, II, 179–83. This version has been modified for accessibility.
4. Akira Iriye notes that American and Japanese thinking on foreign policy ran parallel in finding clarity in the days after Pearl Harbor. Akira Iriye, *Power and Culture: The Japanese-American War, 1941–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). For a more detailed discussion of Pan-Asianist thinking after Pearl Harbor, see Eri Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan’s War 1931–1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 177–97.

FURTHER READING

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