

BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

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a new mode of writing that ricocheted globally after the 1970s. The marginalized, whether *hibakusha* or women, were valued when they "wrote back" to the center; it wasn't enough to be an individual in a sealed room: the outside world mattered.

Post-modern writers have become acutely aware of what a change of point of view can provide; points of view now shift so quickly and abruptly that ends begin and middles disappear! But authors such as Murakami are not just post-modern because of technique; partly due to Oe's Nobel Prize Speech of 1994, "canonical" Japanese literature can now be profoundly political and portray Japanese actions in China as Murakami and Kazuo Ishiguro have done, or comment bitterly on American "victor's justice" following Yoshimura Akira's lead.

Before ending this review, I would like to comment on one selection which even by itself justifies owning the book and perhaps using whatever pieces of it "fair-use" allows. This wonderful selection is the screenplay of the 1952 film *Ikiru*. Both faculty and students can benefit from analyzing this remarkable, brief screenplay written by Kurosawa. There is an interesting interplay of Confucian concern for the group and the aged, and Buddhist acceptance of dying and death. Reading the script in the context of this anthology, however, led me to ponder the reasons why the film appeared in 1952: While in other films Kurosawa evokes the sweep and passion of the samurai past, here the modern hero has become the salaryman, passing life in a bureaucracy Western and Eastern cultures have mutually engendered, a mundane life that numbs the soul. But it may be with this film that we need to stop analyzing what it signifies for a society at a particular time and place, and just relive the experience of seeing this film the first time and feeling the anxiety of whether Mr. Watanabe could ever find a moment of happiness. Whatever we search for in literature, either for ourselves or for our students, is found in this film and script.

At first I was irritated that this book, called "Contemporary Japanese Literature," was reprinted wholesale without warning on the cover when "contemporary" ended. But I had a change of heart. The book is vital to those studying world literature in the period 1945–1975, and for that purpose, it is rightly untouched and open for further analysis and reflection. ■

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THE ASIAN AMERICAN CENTURY

BY WARREN I. COHEN

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2002

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REVIEWED BY JAMES M. CARTER



In this short volume, the esteemed historian of US-East Asian relations, Warren I. Cohen, offers an overview of the last one hundred years of that relationship. This collection actually consists of three lectures, the Edwin O. Reischauer Lectures, given at Harvard University's John King Fairbank Center for East Asian Research. The three lectures, or chapters, "The Struggle for Dominance in East Asia,"

"The Americanization of East Asia," and "The Asianization of America," offer a combination of conventional historical narrative and novel interpretation of the political and cultural elements of US-East Asian relations since the turn of the twentieth century.

Cohen's opening chapter on the "struggle for dominance" in the East pits a rising United States fresh from its imperial seizures in the Philippines and Hawaii against the parallel rise of the thoroughly reformed Japanese state of the late *Meiji* period. Japan quickly began spreading its influence in the region and, by the early twentieth century, manifested a desire for regional empire with a ravaged and divided China as its plum. Explicitly dismissing American "open door" imperial ambitions, Cohen argues instead that US officials cared far more for affairs in Europe than Asia during the period leading to World War II. He maintains that the United States ended what he terms a policy of "complacency" toward Asia abruptly only with the onset of World War II and the subsequent Cold War around mid-century. Once this shift in US policy occurred, however, "American leaders were determined to dominate the entire area, including Southeast Asia, militarily."¹

As a result of this historic shift in policy, the United States went on to become the leading power in East Asia during most, if not all, of the Cold War. World war, civil war, revolution, the Korean War, the war in Vietnam, the destruction of Cambodia, and upheaval, dislocation, and violence from Thailand and Burma to Indonesia and the Philippines, all mark the sordid history of the twentieth century in East Asia. The United States played an active, and occasionally the lead role in making this history. While acknowledging the tragedy as well as the absurdity of the American war in Vietnam, Cohen looks back over the whole century from the vantage point of the twenty-first and boldly concludes that "most people in East Asia are far better off today than they would have been if the Americans had stayed home."² The author points to the development of political democracy in South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong as his rationale. Cohen's intrepid

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conclusion is eerily reminiscent of American poet Ralph Waldo Emerson's nineteenth-century conclusion that Texas, Mexico, and Oregon all must be taken "and it will in the course of ages be of small import by what particular occasions and methods it was done."³

The subsequent two chapters center on the exchange between East Asia and the United States. What is fairly well-known is the transfer of American culture to Asia: the prevalence of television shows such as *Bay Watch* and *Dallas*, the popularity of American sports such as baseball and basketball, and the ubiquity of *McDonalds* and *Kentucky Fried Chicken*. All is well known. Cohen's thesis here, though, is not: the people of Asia choose *freely* what aspects of American culture they will take. They then adapt those elements to make them useful, desirable, and satisfying. The result is "hybridization"—a mixing of American and native culture that retains key elements of the latter. Cohen here is explicitly challenging the argument, grown more pronounced in the age of globalization, for an American cultural imperialism.

Cohen goes quite a bit further than this, arguing that Asia has actually had a far greater and more enduring effect on the United States than the other way around. To buttress this unusual statement, he employs some intriguing, if anecdotal, evidence—the prevalence and popularity in the US of Chinese films such as *Raise the Red Lantern*, *Eat, Drink, Man, Woman*, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*; successful Hollywood careers for Chou Yun-fat, Jackie Chan, Jet Li, and Lucy Liu; and the popularity of martial arts such as karate and tai kwon do. Cohen also uses the prevalence of Chinese food restaurants in the US (more than 35,000) to turn the charge of American cultural imperialism back on itself. He also points out that there are between four and six million Buddhists in the United States. These numbers make them already larger than many Protestant denominations, and they will outnumber Jews in America by 2050.⁴ The millions of immigrants from East Asia since the mid-1960s have also begun to influence US foreign policy. The list goes on.

Of course, all of this interaction and exchange has not been quite as seamless as may appear. The author leaves out quite a lot. Cohen places very little emphasis on the often-acrimonious relations between the US and Japan owing to competing visions of empire, or on the ideological and economic competition that has marked decades of relations with China, and which continues to the present.⁵ The US effort over the whole twentieth century to gain access to and influence in East Asia has been marked at least as much by acrimony as by amity. Important though they certainly are, however, these matters lay beyond the scope of this broad overview of cultural interaction.

Cohen concludes the final chapter by suggesting that whatever can be called "American-ness" is no longer exclusively a product of Western civilization. Asian influence has been great, and the author

welcomes that influence. While scholars and general readers alike will likely take issue with one or more of Cohen's arguments, here he looks forward from these early years of the twenty-first century, already dubbed by many the "Chinese Century,"⁶ and recognizes the interdependence of the United States and East Asia. This interdependence is almost certain to continue to grow, and the relationship will continue to grow in complex and unforeseen ways. ■

NOTES

1. Cohen, *The Asian American Century*, 19.
2. *The Asian American Century*, 32, 76–78.
3. Emerson quoted in Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny* (Harvard University Press: 1981), 177.
4. *The Asian American Century*, 105–106.
5. Michael M. Phillips and Andrew Batson, "China Entreats US to Broaden Its Understanding," *The Wall Street Journal*, A2, December 15, 2006. Evelyn Goh, "China and Southeast Asia," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, December 12, 2006, <http://www.fpiif.org/fpifxt/3780>, accessed December 21, 2006.
6. See Oded Shenkar, *The Chinese Century: The Rising Chinese Economy and Its Impact on the Global Economy, the Balance of Power, and Your Job* (Wharton School Publishing, 2004).

JAMES M. CARTER earned his PhD at the University of Houston in 2004. He teaches US History since 1945, US Diplomatic History, Modern East Asia, and the US, and Vietnam at Texas A&M. He has published articles on the role of private contractors in building South Vietnam, on war profiteering from Vietnam to Iraq, and is currently completing an article on US political advisors to Vietnam from 1954–1960. His manuscript, *Inventing Vietnam: the United States and State Building, 1954–1968*, is under contract with Cambridge University Press.

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