Cross-Cultural Perception and World War II
American Japanists of the 1940s and Their Images of Japan

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The decade of the 1940s saw the United States and Japan bitter enemies, reconciled on terms dictated by the United States only after the total subjugation of Japan. The 1940s were also a crucial decade in the development of studies on Japan in the United States. This essay examines that decade's writing on Japan of six Americans—Ruth Benedict, John M. Maki, Edwin O. Reischauer, Charles B. Fahs, John F. Embree, and Helen Mears—and seeks to document the relation between their views of the United States and their views of Japan. The essay suggests that those writers most fully committed at home (to America, to democracy) were those least able to empathize with Japan, and that those somewhat critical of the United States were able to present a less distorted picture of Japan. Thus, the study of writers' domestic commitments emerges as one important guide to the understanding of their views of foreign reality.

To see clearly across cultural boundaries is a difficult task under the best of conditions. And conditions are rarely good. Writing almost twenty years ago, Harold Isaacs suggested that the years since 1700—in one sense the best of times for Europe and America—were not the best of times for Europeans and Americans to "understand" the rest of the world. Isaacs noted that the context in which such attempts at understanding took place was one of Western domination and non-Western subordination. In Isaacs' words (1958: 407): "For nearly three

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hundred years this underpinning [of the total relationship between Western and Asian and African men] was the assumption of Western superiority: a whole vast political-military-social-economic-racial-personal complex was built upon it. Almost every Western image of Asian and other non-Western peoples was based on it.” Writing twenty years after Isaacs, Edward Said (1978) has fleshed out that theme, basing himself not on interviews but on the published writings about the Arab world of European and American literary figures, statesmen, and scholars.1

Both Isaacs and Said argued that images of the “non-Western” can be correlated closely with images of the “Western”; that is, that the way in which “Western” writers look at their “non-Western” subjects is a function of how they look at themselves and their culture. Writing of the American ideal of total social mobility, Isaacs (1958: 388) declared: “Every man who is a product of the American culture stands in some relation to this central dream of his society. . . . [T]he democratic dream still provides the yardstick by which the ‘American’ measures his experience of other cultures more formally stratified than his own.” Casting his analysis in more general terms, Said (1978: 40) described European and American images of the Arab world as images of “the Other,” images standing in dialectical relation to images of the self: The Oriental is “irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike ‘different;’” the European is “rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal.’”

Granted that Isaacs and Said are largely accurate and that there are problems with virtually all European and American writing about the “non-Western” world, it stands to reason that there have been better times and worse times, times when images of the non-Western world were less stereotyped and less condescending and times when the stereotypes and the condescension reigned virtually unchallenged. If our images of the Other are in fact a function of our images of ourselves, then it would seem to follow that our images of the non-Western world would be most condescending at times when we feel most confident of ourselves and our values. World War II was such a time; the loss of confidence we have experienced more recently only underlines the confidence of the war years.

In 1917 Randolph Bourne (1964: 7, 11) wrote with shock of “the coalescence of the intellectual classes in support of the military programme” and of the pernicious effects that rallying around the flag in World War I had on American intellectuals: “Simple syllogisms are substituted for analysis, things are known by their labels; our heart's

1. For a discussion of Said’s ideas as they relate to European and American studies of Japan, see Minear (1980a, part of a symposium review).
desire dictates what we shall see. . . . Thought becomes an easy rationalization of what is actually going on or what is to happen inevitably tomorrow." Since Bourne's day many others (Mencken, 1920; Grattan, 1927; Blakey, 1970; Gruber, 1975) have written of the behavior of American intellectuals during World War I. However, very few writers have addressed the parallel problem of the behavior of American intellectuals during World War II (Barnes, 1953; Baritz, 1960; Howell, 1971; Winkler, 1978).

This essay is a study of the writings of six Americans who wrote about Japan in the 1940s, the decade in which the United States and Japan fought a bitter war. It attempts to document the relation between their images of America and their images of Japan and to show how, in most cases, their perceptions of Japan were condescending and pejorative ones. As a preliminary observation let me suggest that there is an inverse relation to be found. Those who are uncritical toward America tend to be especially critical of Japan. Those who are somewhat critical toward America tend to be more sympathetic to Japan. Although I can offer no statistical analysis, I would suggest that most Americans writing during the 1940s about Japan occupy the first position and that very few occupied the second. The cases of these few raise this important question: What factors enabled them to arrive at accurate perceptions across cultural lines even at a time of conflict between America and Japan?

**Career Patterns and the War**

Just as in World War I, in World War II many American academics put their skills at the disposal of the war effort. The impact of the war on the field of Japanese studies was particularly acute. To begin with, the field was tiny. Today there are over 500 professionally trained specialists

2. There is, of course, a third position, that of those wholly disaffected with domestic reality who look for paradise abroad and become largely committed to that foreign reality. In the twentieth century some Americans on the left have sought utopias in the "new" societies: the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, Cuba, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (Hollander, 1973) No Americans writing on Japan in the 1940s took such a stance, and the range of opinions on Japan available to the American public was correspondingly narrow. That no Americans saw utopia in Japan in the 1940s is understandable, given Japan's repression at home and military action abroad. Hence, this study is less an attack on the partisanship of those Japanists who were partisans of the American cause than a consideration of the effects of that partisanship on their images of Japan. Through their writings, of course, those images influenced the thinking of a great many others, both within the field of Japanese studies and in the larger arenas of public opinion and official thinking.
on Japan; but in 1941 there were probably fewer than a dozen. Then, since Japan was the enemy, the war catapulted the specialists into positions of importance in the war effort. Charles Burton Fahs (1908-1980), a young professor of political science at Pomona in 1941, by 1945 became chief of the Far Eastern Division of the Research and Analysis Branch of the OSS. Edwin O. Reischauer (b. 1910) went from the Harvard faculty to become, by 1945, special assistant to the director of the Office of Far Eastern Affairs of the State Department. Others attained posts of comparable significance: chief of the Division of Northeast Asian Affairs of the State Department (Hugh Borton, b. 1903); assistant chief of the Division of Japanese and Korean Economic Affairs of the State Department (William W. Lockwood, 1906-1978); chief of the Special Research Section of the OSS and the State Department (Chitoshi Yanaga, b. 1903); regional specialist in psychological warfare for the Office of War Information (John M. Maki, b. 1909). Moreover, some scholars who were not experts on Japan were recruited for the task of knowing the enemy. Most prominent among these was Ruth Benedict (1887-1948), who worked for the Office of War Information between 1943 and 1945. Her book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (1946), without doubt one of the most influential books on Japan by an American author, was one product of her work for the OWI.

After the war this generation of Japanists went from strength to strength. From important positions in the war effort, they moved to important academic and bureaucratic positions and were enormously influential in the postwar development of the field of Japanese studies. Three veterans of wartime service became presidents of the Association for Asian Studies: Reischauer, Borton, and Lockwood (the figure becomes four if geographer Robert B. Hall, almost a generation older, is included). Several (notably Fahs and Borton) had important foundation connections. Most had long careers teaching and writing about Japan. It is clearly not the case that these Japanists owe their success to the war. In a field as small as theirs was in 1941, and with individuals of such talent, fruitful careers were almost a foregone conclusion. But Pearl Harbor caught them as junior academics in their thirties, occupied years of their lives, and gave them access to powers that junior academics (and their seniors, too) rarely dream of. But such experiences and such successes were not without their costs.
Those Intensely Committed at Home:
Benedict, Maki, Reischauer

At one end of the spectrum are those writers intensely committed at home and largely disaffected by Japan. Prominent among these writers are Ruth Benedict, John M. Maki, and Edwin O. Reischauer. Benedict and Reischauer are the two most famous American Japanists of the postwar years, and their writings have reached a broad audience. Although less famous outside the field, Maki is an able and respected figure within it.

Benedict wrote only one book on Japan, but Maki and Reischauer have published many volumes, including popular works, texts, and monographs. My concern is with the popular works they published during the period 1940-1950. It is not my contention that Maki and Reischauer hold today the views they espoused in the 1940s. Indeed, that is not the case. Moreover, I have no intention of passing judgment on entire careers. I wish merely to analyze some of what these individuals wrote under the pressure of the Pacific War and its immediate aftermath. I contend that these ideas are representative of the mood within the field of Japanese studies as that field developed in the United States in the late 1940s.

Views of Home

Benedict had established her reputation in the 1930s with her first book, Patterns of Culture (1932), in which she developed the idea that all aspects of a given culture are interrelated. Her subject societies then were primitive ones: the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico, the Dobu of Melanesia, and the Kwakiutl of the Pacific Northwest. In that book she pleaded (1932: 257) for acceptance of “the coexisting and equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself.” Six years later she published an eloquent tract against racism, Race: Science and Politics (1940). Surely this is an exemplary background for one who seeks to study Japan.

Still, Benedict is not without ideological commitments, and the war brought these to the fore. In August 1941 the New Republic called editorially for an immediate declaration of war. Benedict was one of 21
contributors to respond; she dissented, suggesting: “Declaration of war should be a last resort, kept in reserve with full knowledge that war in itself never decides crucial issues.” She called upon “those who have democratic values most at heart” to “work that those who have access to the fullest and least public knowledge may be free to fight well to win a pre-war peace in full knowledge that they may at some moment have to fight a war as well.” She concluded: “Pre-war peace or a shooting war, the objective is the same: the permanent victory of democratic ways of life.”

Benedict repeats this call for a democratic world in an essay entitled “American Melting Pot, 1942 Model,” published in that year under the auspices of the National Education Association. There Benedict shows (1942: 22) a strong awareness of the racial tensions within American life and of the obstacles to equality presented by the “established Old-American order.” Still, these factors do not affect her goal, and she urges intercultural educators to build their curricula around “a challenge to all pupils and citizens to work together without discriminations due to race or nationality for a world that is honestly democratic.” Writing the following year on the topic, “Transmitting Our Democratic Heritage in the Schools,” Benedict singles out (1943: 724-725) among the traditional American values most suited to a “changing world” “that pre-eminent [value] of initiative and independence”; and among American traditions, “liberty and opportunity,” with “despotic power . . . at a minimum.” The key, she suggests, is “adequate scope for personal achievement.”

Despite her awareness of racial tensions in American society, she is essentially optimistic that the melting pot has done its job. She writes (1942: 21-22): “In America, Old World groups do not keep their idiosyncracies to the second, third, and fourth generations; they are given up voluntarily.” Hence, celebrations of “special folkways” should be used “not as a primary means of achieving better intercultural relations but as proof that our intercultural education has already succeeded.”

These prior commitments on Benedict’s part spill over into The Chrysanthemum and the Sword in various ways. First, she assumes that there is a single American culture, an American national character. Time and again (1946: 28, 36, 177, 27) she draws contrasts between America and Japan: “Americans gear all their living to a constantly challenging world”; “Americans thrill to all rescue”; “Americans do not believe that pleasures have to be learned”; “It is alien to equality-loving
Americans.” Not surprisingly, this American national character is close to that depicted by de Tocqueville; Benedict paraphrases him (1946: 46) in this passage:

Here [in America] people really considered themselves the equals of others. Their social intercourse was on a new and easy footing. They fell into conversation as man to man. Americans did not care about the little attentions of a hierarchical etiquette. . . . These Americans trusted equality as they trusted nothing else; even liberty, he said, they often in practice let fly out of the window while they looked the other way. But they lived equality.

Benedict continues:

It is invigorating for Americans to see their forebears through the eyes of this stranger. . . . There have been many changes in our country but the main outlines have not altered. We recognize, as we read, that America in 1830 was already America as we know it.

Hence, Benedict can speak (1946: 294, 314) of the “simple freedoms which Americans count upon as unquestioningly as the air they breathe,” of “the free and easy human contacts to which we are accustomed in the United States, the imperative demand to be independent, the passion each individual has to choose his own mate, his own job, the house he will live in and the obligations he will assume.” From her comments to the teachers we might conclude that large parts of this picture of America are more ideal than real; but this is the portrait of American life which Benedict holds up in The Chrysanthemum and the Sword as a mirror to Japanese reality.

In mid-1945, after the defeat of Germany but before the Japanese surrender, John M. Maki published a book entitled Japanese Militarism: Its Cause and Cure. Writing “in the hope of bringing into clearer focus the aims of the ideological war” against Japan, Maki (1945: ix, 2) makes it brutally clear that the war is an ideological one:

If we could carry the war against people to its logical conclusion and kill seventy-two million Japanese, we should not have to worry about the winning of the war of ideas. Modern weapons have not yet reached the point where they can annihilate a nation; we must accept the fact that there will be a good many million Japanese still living when this war comes to an end. The war of ideas involves these people. If we can shatter their indoctrination by means of a crushing military defeat and provide a new ideological basis for their political and economic structures, we shall prepare them to return again to the society of nations as well as protect ourselves against the outbreak of another war in the Pacific.
For Maki (1945: 250, 233, 240, 249), Japan is mired in "political medievalism"; it must now pass through a stage of internal chaos partly as "expiation," partly as "political adolescence." "To attain political maturity" will not be so easy; Japan must experience "the political, economic, social, intellectual, and moral equivalents of the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, and the Renaissance. It is only thus that much of the primitive and medieval deadwood that encumbers Japan's political and economic orders can be cleared away." The Japanese must be reeducated "so that they will be able to understand and to make workable a system of democratic government." Here is Maki's grail, available readily in Western political experience, although he does allow the Japanese some leeway: "The difference between the foreign concepts that will form the basis of the new Japan and what will eventually develop may be as great as the differences between American, French, and Swiss democracy." But that it must be a democracy Maki does not doubt.

Edwin O. Reischauer's commitments are similar to those of Maki. In June 1942 Reischauer offered, via radio his initial assessment of the Pacific war:

In Japan we do not face merely a military enemy or a rival in a game of power politics. Japan represents a political, economic, and social system which is a direct challenge to our own ways of life and thought. Japan is not simply an enemy nation. It represents an enemy ideology which is threatening to drive the ideas of democracy, equality, and individual freedom from the Far East [1942: 3]:

Reischauer's solution for Japan is democracy. In 1950 he writes:

We are obviously committed [in the Occupation] to attempting to bring her up to our own democratic standards... We are anxious to prove that democracy is an article for export, that it can work and will work beyond the borders of the few really democratic states of today... We are anxious to have another people firmly on the side of democracy, one more nation to help keep the preponderant weight of the world behind the ideals of individual freedom and the acceptance of majority decisions in both domestic and international affairs [1950: 40].

In a section entitled "Japan as an American Problem," he asks rhetorically (1950: 51-52), "What are our prospects for success?" and answers:

We Americans have usually attempted to answer this question primarily on the basis of our varied estimates of what we ourselves have done in Japan since the war. Because of ignorance about the Japanese and a natural egocentrism, we have often overlooked an even more vital
factor—the Japanese themselves. The materials are as important as the plans of the architect. You cannot build a skyscraper with mud and wattle.4

Like Benedict, Reischauer has a distinct view of American national character. In 1950 (pp. 224-229) his adjectives for the Occupationnaires are as follows: vigorous and confident; honest, disciplined, fair, and unselfconsciously friendly; enthusiastic, fundamentally optimistic, and motivated by "essential good will." He comments as follows: "That reasonably adequate leadership for a war-torn Japan could be improvised from the limited human resources available to General MacArthur is a tribute to the versatility and good judgment of the average American."5 Needless to say, Reischauer's image is an idealized one, not to mention a WASPish one; it seems to come more from civics textbooks than from observation. But it is this vision of America which serves as a foil against which Reischauer measures Japan.

Thus, Benedict, Maki, and Reischauer all come to the study of Japan with a prior commitment to democratic values. They vary in stridency and in their awareness of the gap between ideal and real in American society; but there is no variation in their commitment to democratic values. We shall see that this democratic dream provided the ideal against which these Americans measured Japan. Needless to say, they found Japan sadly wanting.

*Views of Japan*

Benedict's book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, is something of a triumph on two counts. First, it represented an attempt to study

4. Reischauer deleted the image of architect and materials from later editions of this book.

5. Contrast Reischauer's comments with those of Pearl Buck. Although, unlike Reischauer, she was born in the United States, she lived in China between the ages of 3 and 40, returning to the United States in 1933. In a speech to the National Institute of Immigrant Welfare in April 1937 (Harris, 1971: 6-7), Buck identifies with the immigrants and tells of her own feelings about America before her return in 1933:

Now I had my picture of America, too. It was made up of visual images of my mother's much-loved country home, of which she told me many stories, of a land of great plenty and ease, from which came money for the poor Chinese, because all Americans were rich and Christian. It would not have occurred to me that there were illiterate Americans, or poor Americans, or criminals. As I grew older and understood better inevitable human nature this picture was modified, and reason did indeed compel me to understand that heaven existed nowhere, but still something of this early picture persisted.

When I first came here, then, I endeavored to find a recognizable country of my own. I looked for Americans. But I could not find them. . . . I came to see that these true Americans I had been looking for didn't exist at all, and there were no typical Americans. I have come indeed to feel that if there is a typical American it is the one least typical of anyone except himself.
Japanese society systematically at a distance, for during the war Benedict could not travel to Japan; instead, she had to make do with a handful of Japanese and Japanese American informants in America. Second, it was a pioneer attempt to apply the methodology of Patterns of Culture to a modern society.

But as a picture of Japan as a modern society, the book fails on many counts. Others (Minzokugaku kenkyū, 1949; Bennett and Nagai, 1953; Sakuta, 1967) have written of these problems: that her informants were too few and not representative, that her picture, if valid, is grossly out of date, that she overestimates the homogeneity of Japan. What concerns us here is the extent to which her verdict on Japanese culture is ultimately a negative one. She speaks (1946; 165, 315, 296) of Japanese ennui as “the sickness of an overvulnerable people,” of the social pressures on the individual which “ask too much of the individual. . . . They [the Japanese] have to repress too much for their own good.” Japan is deficient in just those values which Benedict recommended to the American educators: initiative, independence, liberty, and opportunity. In short, Japan is not democratic enough. Alluding to her title, Benedict concludes that “Chrysanthemums can be beautiful without wire racks and such drastic pruning.”

Moreover, Benedict sees in these cultural deficiencies the answer to the question of why Japan attacked the United States. For what she sees (1946: 300, 169) is “old and dangerous patterns of aggressiveness,” aggression directed either inward (depression, lassitude, suicide) or outward. Of Japanese intellectuals in the 1930s she writes: “They embraced nationalistic goals and turned the attack outward again, away from their own breasts. In totalitarian aggression against outside nations they could ‘find themselves’ again.” Benedict uses her depiction of Japanese character as an explanation of recent history. How to explain Pearl Harbor? Not in terms of military ratios, economic boycotts, neutrality laws, and the like, but in terms of Japanese character; not in terms of politics and diplomacy, but in terms of pathology. How differently would Benedict have written about Japan had there been no war? It is impossible to say; and, of course, except for the war, she would not have written at all. However, the element of pathology is strong in her work, and for her Pearl Harbor is a prime symptom of the Japanese disease.

As we have seen, Maki and Reischauer yield to no one in their antagonism to the ideological challenge they see in Japan; but some nuances of difference remain. Unlike Benedict, Maki does not analyze
the Japanese national character. Rather, he discourses at length (1945: 182, 226, 232, 189, 190-191) on the forces which, he suggests, made Japan "a nation of warriors": "Modern Japanese militarism is the product of a combination of age-old social, political, and economic factors." It is these "forces that led Japan into war against most of the world." Did American policy play an important role in the attack on Pearl Harbor? Yes, in the sense that "none of the democracies was willing to use war to stop war." In other senses, no. Maki does not mention, for example, the American embargo of oil of July 1941; but his attitude can be extrapolated from his treatment of Japan's shortage of raw materials:

The Army then [Maki is talking about the late 1930s] made further use of the lack by telling the people that the nations standing in its way were attempting to strangle Japan by cutting her off from access to vital raw materials. The result of this was that the people felt that they were being deprived of something that was rightfully theirs, by the machinations of China, the United States, and Britain.

The Pacific war is Japan's fault and presents the United States with the golden opportunity to change the very basis of Japanese social, economic, and political life.

Reischauer's analysis of Japanese culture is close to that of Benedict. He describes (1950: 117, 141) the Japanese as "a people whose emotions are so pent up by other forces as to have more explosive powers than we would consider normal." When aesthetics and religion do not provide release, when the "heavy cloak of conformity" does not keep things in check, then the Japanese are in trouble:

The specific situational code of the Japanese works well enough on ordinary occasions, perhaps with less friction and strain than our own more individualistic code of conduct, but it seems to break down more completely than our more generalized ethics when confronted with the unexpected, throwing the Japanese back on their unguided instincts.

Unlike Benedict, however, Reischauer does not tie his explanation of Pearl Harbor specifically to his analysis of Japanese culture. That explanation (1950: 22-28) is still a highly partisan one. Soon after seizure of the Philippines in 1898, we Americans "became the open opponents of imperialism in Asia," a stance which brought us into conflict with a

6. In a book review written in 1948 Maki (1949a) shows considerable skepticism of generalizations about national character.
Japan which was “drunk with her first spectacular successes and carried away by her desire to rival the great colonial powers of Europe.” The Manchurian Incident of 1931-1933 becomes “the first fatal step” to general war; and America’s “failure” to respond forcefully becomes a secondary cause, for “only America stood in Japan’s path to empire.”

Thus, the Japanists who were largely committed to America or to democracy were also strongly critical of Japanese reality. Strongly positive on domestic American reality, they were strongly negative on Japan. We look to them in vain for an explanation of the Pacific war which is even faintly objective.

The Critical: Fahs and Embree

“In a time of faith, skepticism is the most intolerable of all insults.” Thus said Randolph Bourne in 1917 (1964: 5). Judging solely from the written record, there were few American Japanists who did not subscribe in some form to the ideological crusade of Benedict, Maki, and Reischauer. Two dissenters from that orthodoxy merit our particular attention: Charles Burton Fahs and John Fee Embree.

An extended analysis of Fahs’ thinking is ruled out by the fact that he wrote only one book on Japan, a monograph entitled Government in Japan: Recent Trends in its Scope and Operation (1940). In 1941 he was recruited into intelligence work; from the OSS he moved to the Rockefeller Foundation; and from the Rockefeller Foundation he returned to government service (as minister-counselor in the Tokyo embassy while Reischauer was ambassador). Hence, for a period of almost thirty years after 1941, Fahs had duties which made it difficult, if not impossible, to resume writing about Japan.

However, Government in Japan is strikingly different from the writings of Benedict, Maki, and Reischauer. In his preface Fahs makes clear (1940: xi) his concern that planning for a “bilateral or multilateral peace settlement in the Far East” not be clouded by “emotional biases such as have been encouraged during recent years by the repeated charges of ‘fascism,’ ‘totalitarianism,’ ‘militarism,’ and ‘feudalism’ made in discussions of Japanese political trends.”

It is the author’s considered opinion that these epithets, at least in the derogatory sense in which they are usually applied, are dangerously misleading and that their use is due to lack of perspective. They are
superficial judgments on political tendencies which, in reality, have origins far beyond the present crisis and are but Japanese counterparts of trends evident throughout the world, including the United States, France, and the British Empire.

Fahs (1940: 88) has economics in mind, and first and foremost “the worldwide trend toward more comprehensive economic control [by the state].” Japan’s expansion on the continent and the failure of party government, he suggests, are both effects of this trend, not independent causes.

It is not necessary to argue the validity of this analysis, although it seems remarkably clairvoyant. What is important to our present concerns is the fact that this analysis permits Fahs to deal with Japan on the same basis as with America. Thus, in his conclusion he can restate (1940: 88, 89) the themes of his preface, that “in domestic politics Japanese statesmen seek the same advantages for their people as Western leaders do for theirs, and that this search has led them along paths not unlike those chosen in the United States, Great Britain, France, or other Western countries”; further, “that the present Japanese Government is the legitimate and accepted government of the Japanese people, and that in ability, patriotism, and social vision its leaders are neither far above nor far below the statesmen of other nations interested in the Pacific.” Granted, Fahs writes before Pearl Harbor, and during the war he served his country, just as did Benedikt, Maki, and Reischauer. However, his writing and theirs are worlds apart, both in tone and in content.

Not only is Fahs sympathetic (1940: 89) to Japan’s problems (“Japan’s economic arguments deserve more careful examination than they have yet received”), but he is also critical of reality at home. Is it a mistake to see criticism of the United States in the following lines? Fahs writes: “Both the universality and the persistence of the causal factors make it probable that governmental control over economics and over the affairs of the individual will continue to increase. There is certainly no reason to expect a change earlier in Japan than in the United States.”

Fahs does not like some of what he sees in Japan in 1940; but neither does he like some of what he sees in America in 1940. He understands the folly of dealing with Japan in a vacuum: He is willing to make the connections with trends in the United States and to deal with both in an evenhanded way. Had he not been critical of what was going on in this

7. In a lengthy letter about the evolution of his thinking, Fahs wrote (1979: 1-2): “By the time I returned to the United States [from Europe in 1930] I had come to three
country, he would undoubtedly have been more hostile to what was going on in Japan.  

John Fee Embree (1908–1950) was an anthropologist; indeed, he was the only American anthropologist who had conducted fieldwork in Japan before the war. A junior faculty member at the University of Toronto in 1941, in 1942 he became a community analyst for the War Relocation Authority, the agency supervising the internment of the Japanese Americans; later he taught in the Civil Affairs Training Schools set up by the Army to train future members of the Occupation of Japan. After the war he spent one year as Cultural Affairs Officer of the State Department in Bangkok and Saigon. Unlike Fahs, Embree published steadily from 1939 through 1950, the year of his untimely death in an automobile accident. Many of these essays concern America as much as Japan, and Embree was often sharply critical of what he saw as problems with the Occupation of Japan. His targets included (1946: 489) the relocation of the Japanese Americans (“one of the less happy by-products of the war with Japan” and American military occupations in Japan and Micronesia. Of the occupation of Japan and its attempt to “democratize” Japan, Embree wrote (1945b: 51) in September 1945: “Almost by definition an army of occupation is authoritarian and lays down the law by proclamation. It is difficult to see how any true democracy can develop under these conditions: 1. That violence was coming. . . . 2. That Fascism and Nazism were mirror images of communism. . . . 3. That it is impossible to maintain political and intellectual freedom without a considerable degree of economic freedom.” I am grateful to Mrs. Fahs for permitting me to quote from her husband’s letter.

8. In the letter mentioned in note 7, Fahs addressed himself (1979: 2-3) to the question of his thinking in the late 1930s:

In Japan from 1934 to 1936 my principal assignment was to learn Japanese. Aside from that I paid particular attention to the election system and to radical movements. . . . In late spring 1936 I spent a couple of weeks in Korea and Manchuria under Japanese occupation and then about two months in China, much of it visiting rural reconstructions centers. When I returned to the United States in the summer of 1936 I was not disaffected. After what I had seen abroad the United States looked very good. I noted some signs of similar trends but in far less virulent forms. Nor was I a Japanophile. I knew Japan’s political shortcomings pretty well. But I thought that much of the criticism of Japan was unfair. In the little volume for the Inquiry series I was trying to say that much of what Japan had done in her internal political and economic policies had analogies in the countries of the West and that she still was more democratic than Germany, Italy or the USSR. The implication was, I hoped, that she should not be ostracized. Incidentally, the IPR editors wanted to eliminate all the analogies to the United States. A few were cut (I forget what they were) and I had to fight with E. C. Carter to keep in those which are in the book as published.
conditions.” A colleague has written (Pelzel, 1952: 221) that Embree’s “prognosis for the development of a democratic society in Japan under a military occupation kept him aloof from this experiment”; and, in fact, after 1945 Embree turned away from Japan to Southeast Asia.

But Embree saved his sharpest attacks for his anthropological colleagues who let the war affect their thinking. He took particular exception (1945a: 636) to the wartime studies of national character, which to him were highly ethnocentric and “suspiciously reminiscent of the racism of an earlier day.” In 1945 he noted with derision that some social scientists during the war attacked Japanese culture for its “‘adolescent’ or ‘gangster’ qualities . . . overlooking for the moment the youth of American culture, and such little matters as American lynching parties and race riots.” Here is the opening of his impassioned essay of 1950 (1950: 430-431), “A Note on Ethnocentrism in Anthropology”:

We anthropologists pride ourselves on our objectivity in regard to cultures. Just as the physicist does not take a moral stand for or against the atoms which he studies, so we take our stand on cultural relativism. We speak of complex and simple cultures, matrilineal or patrilineal societies, but eschew identifying complexity with progress or similarity with western culture as a sign of enlightenment. Societies are of many types of which the contemporary American is but one.

Before World War II such remarks would have been truisms; no anthropologist would have seriously questioned them. But when the crisis of war arose and we found ourselves attacked by an Oriental nation which we had thought, in the usual popular way, to be ‘progressive,’ some of us seem suddenly to have lost our objectivity and decided that those objectionable little people must have an evil, a ‘pathological,’ or at best an ‘adolescent’ culture.

Strong words, indeed, but considering the wartime studies of Japanese national character, right on the mark.

Embree also criticized (1950: 431) the tendency of applied anthropologists to become servants of power, both at home and abroad. They operated, he suggested,

on the assumption that American western culture is self-evidently the best there is, and that it is therefore the duty of anthropologists to aid the United States government in maintaining it at home and spreading it abroad. On the home front, the applied anthropologist would maintain the “equilibrium” of industrial situations by advising managers how to manage their workers; he has been little concerned to advise the managed
how to maintain their own social interests vis-à-vis the managers. In cross-cultural situations the aim is to aid the government administrator in maintaining his rule with a minimum of trouble—but so far few applied anthropologists, at least in Micronesia and Japan, have put their services at the disposal of the administered in order that they may get what they want out of their alien governors.

Three of these criticisms date back to 1945. They did not keep Embree from serving his government, both during the war and after, in full awareness of the political implications of such service. However, they insulated Embree against the parochial nationalism of Benedict, Maki, and Reischauer. Embree's *Suye Mura: A Japanese Village* (1939) is a classic of descriptive anthropology, warm and yet as objective as it is possible for anthropology to be; and his book *The Japanese Nation* (written during the war and published in 1945) carries on in the same tradition.

In the latter book Embree emphasizes (like Fahs) the economic factor, that Japan, an agricultural country through the mid-nineteenth century, industrialized rapidly and as a result became dependent on foreign trade. He writes: (1945c: 46, 9, 258) "This drastic change . . . brought the country into repeated conflict with the nations around her as a result of her attempts to gain national security in a world of competing economies." Hence, Japan was "a newly industrialized independent nation in the midst of an area dominated by Occidental colonial and economic interests—a situation which was bound, sooner or later, to lead to a war of survival." Like Fahs, Embree takes the Japanese case seriously, devoting a seven-page section to "beliefs concerning causes of the war," in which he presents Japanese views at length "because so little attention is generally given to them or they are quoted out of context and in such a manner as to appear ridiculous. Actually they are the natural products of Japanese history, recent development, and international contacts." Moreover, Embree writes, these attitudes "appear to a Japanese just as sound and are believed just as deeply as are American beliefs that the United States does not favor aggression, or that Japanese are a homogeneous race of fanatical *samurai.*" Thus, almost alone among anthropologists studying Japan, Embree kept his head even in war and preserved the anthropologists' vaunted objectivity.

Fahs and Embree did not share the crusading democratic zeal of the fully committed Japanists, nor did they see the war as an outgrowth of
Japanese personality or even as an ideological struggle. Instead, fortified by a healthy skepticism about contemporary America, they could live with the ambiguities of a tragic vision of the Pacific war. This tragic vision gave as much benefit of the doubt to Japan as to the United States. Their skepticism did not prevent them from taking part in the war effort against Japan, and in no sense were they partisans of the Japanese cause. Still, their writings provide a welcome contrast to the cultural chauvinism of Benedict, Maki, and Reischauer.

A Nonacademic Voice: Helen Mears

We have dealt thus far with academic Japanists, but they were not the only Americans writing about Japan in the 1940s. Others included diplomat Joseph Grew; correspondents Russell Brines, Hugh Byas, William Chamberlin, Hessell Tiltman, and Otto Tolischus; ex-officials like Edwin Martin and Herbert Feis; and novelist Pearl Buck. Unfortunately, space does not permit an examination of their writings. However, their work and that of editorialists, war correspondents, cartoonists and comic-book writers, Hollywood script-writers, and others formed the nonacademic context into which the works of the academic writers must be fitted.

Most of the nonacademic writing on Japan—as most of the academic writing—is of value today primarily as evidence of American attitudes; it is not of lasting value in any other connection. There are two notable exceptions: John Hersey's Hiroshima (1946) and Helen Mears' Mirror for Americans: Japan (1948). Hersey's book is a warmly human account of the atomic bomb's impact on specific Japanese lives; but it is almost wholly devoid of interpretation. Should the bomb have been dropped? Should the second bomb have been dropped? What was the military situation? How did the war come about? These are issues which Hersey avoids. In the final pages (1946: 117-118) he quotes one Japanese survivor: "It was war and we had to expect it [the bomb]"; another that "There's nothing to be done about it"; and a third that "they ought to try the men who decided to use the bomb and they should hang them all." But then he defuses and diffuses this last idea by quoting at length from the report to the Vatican of a German priest who argues that the real issue is not the bomb, but total war: "When," asks the priest, "will our moralists give us a clear answer to this question [of the morality of total war]?" Hersey's Hiroshima undoubtedly increased awareness in the
United States of the bomb, and it enabled its American readers to see Japanese victims as people—no mean accomplishments in 1946. Otherwise it is not a political book.

Mears' *Mirror for Americans: Japan* is the other exception. Published in 1948, it is a study of Japan's history and foreign policy set in the context of the international relations of Asia. Hindsight enables us to see that it is the most important book on Japan written by a westerner in the entire decade 1940-1950. It is remarkable in that it approaches the Pacific war in a nonideological fashion; it is perceptive in setting that war into the context of international power politics in the Pacific since 1850, prescient in seeing that the Pacific war had done little to solve the underlying problems of the Pacific, and startling in 1948 in its willingness to write polemically about the role of the United States.

Then in her forties, Helen Mears had no formal academic credentials as an Asian expert, but she had spent a year (1925) in China and a year (1935) in Japan. Her previous book on Japan, *Year of the Wild Boar* (1973 [1942]), is an account of her encounter with Japan in 1935, deceptively like a travelogue but in fact an exploration of the roots of Japanese culture. Mears had spent the war years in the United States, writing, lecturing, and taking part in the Army's Civil Affairs Training School program. In 1946 she had returned to Japan for a period of months as member of a labor advisory committee under the auspices of the Occupation (Minear, forthcoming-b).

From *Mirror for Americans* it is clear that Mears is a critic of America in the 1940s. Although she writes to explain the rise and fall of Imperial Japan, her ultimate concern (1948: 7) is with America and the American crisis:

> Our crisis started building with the First World War and has accelerated, during the Second, to an exhilarating and dangerous power dive. Unlike the Japanese, we have swung into it with apparently everything in our favor. With power, however, too much can be as dangerous as too little. With our velocity, only a miracle of intelligent planning, disciplined control, and luck will bring us out of it without a crash.

Basing herself on the principle enunciated by John Quincy Adams—that America "goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy"—Mears argues (1948: vii, 324) that recent American leaders have acted unwisely: "Our current foreign-policy leaders . . . lost in their dream of power and glory . . . have become as blind to reality as the Japanese militarists before them. The question for Americans to answer, and
answer at once, is whether we have allowed our Power machine to get out of control or whether we can still take over and reverse our direction.” Thus, Mears is deeply committed to a vision of America and an American role in the world, but it is a vision sharply at odds with then-current reality.

Mears is not happy with much of what she sees in Japan, but she ties her analysis of Japan directly to her criticism of America. Japan is an early case study—and hence a “mirror for Americans”—of what is in store for America. The “power age” which began in the fifteenth century had brought crisis to both Japan and America and (1948: 2-3, 4, 5) “created a state of nationalistic hysteria that had affected certain nations sooner than others, and some nations to a greater degree than others, but progressively, during the twentieth century, had infected the entire world.” In Japan in 1935, she had seen that hysteria take its toll: “I was alarmed then by the unanimity of opinion among all I talked to. It was almost as though, instead of having a brain, each one had a victrola in his head that played over and over the identical record.” But during the war years in America she saw Americans succumb to the same disease: “I was appalled to discover that Americans seemed to have, instead of a brain, the same sort of victrola as the Japanese.”

This analysis leads Mears to a perspective which foreshadows some of the recent insights of Immanuel Wallerstein and his disciples. The “most crucial” problem posed by this crisis, she writes (1948: 5, 6), is that “of directing and controlling political power in a world in which the people’s welfare is increasingly dependent on government, and in which international relations are concurrently interdependent and antagonistic.” In hindsight, the Japanese people—and their leaders—were helpless; they “could no more have controlled the forces that were thrusting them into the slipstream of dangerous and dynamic power than could a passenger control an airplane in the midst of a power dive.” In this light Japan’s experience becomes an object lesson: “To study Japan objectively is to clarify the problems and contradictions of our turbulent age, and to plot a trend that can be extended, with considerable assurance, into the future.”

Mears is not more sympathetic to Japan than are Fahs and Embree; but she has written what they did not, a finished account not simply of recent Japanese history and the war but of the global setting as well. She has analyzed the Pacific war and drawn from that analysis very definite implications about American policy in Asia. The American experience in Asia between 1948 and the present gives to Mirror for Americans the
eerie quality of prophecy, for Mears touches on all the main themes of the postwar Pacific.

The reaction to her book among non-specialists was far from negative; but most American Japanists reacted with hostility. A professor of international relations at Columbia, author of many books on Asia, wrote (Peffer, 1948) that it proves "that a little historical learning is a peculiarly dangerous thing." The East Asian librarian at Columbia dismissed *Mirror for Americans* with the comment (Linton, 1948): "Near-fanaticism and want of realism lessen the value of the book." Neither Benedict nor Reischauer reviewed it, but Maki (1949b) found the book "a bold and sincere statement of one woman's sentiments on the problems of international relations in the modern world and on the occupation of Japan. To regard it as a serious analysis of those problems would be to place it in a category for which, it is to be hoped, it was not intended and in which it would be exposed to damning criticism."

Embree was one of the few academic reviewers to react favorably. He called it "a treatment after the manner of Thucydides," and in a footnote to his polemic on ethnocentrism in anthropology (1950: 431) he commented that *Mirror for Americans* "tells more about why the two countries went to war than all the anthropologists put together." But Embree was the exception rather than the rule, and Mears' book became the victim of a "historical blackout" (Barnes, 1953).

It would be almost 20 years before the political and historical insights of Fahs, Embree, and Mears would loom large in American academic writings on Japan. During those years the ideas of Benedict, Maki, and Reischauer represented the mainstream of American academic thinking about Japan. John W. Hall has written (1971: 24) that "the cultural anthropological approach to Japanese national behavior begun in the work of Ruth Benedict" became the "theoretical core" for "the whole area-study approach to the study of Japan." Under these conditions, of course, it was natural that *Chrysanthemum* remained prominent. (Hall's appraisal of Benedict's work, it should be noted, differs markedly from mine.) Writing from a dramatically different point of view, John W. Dower speaks (1975: 33) of "the ethos which has prevailed over postwar Japan studies—the fact that much American scholarship on Japan has tended to be congruent with the objectives of the American government." These two comments, one approving and the other sharply critical, point to the legacy of the writings of the mainstream American Japanists of the 1940s.
During those years criticism of the received wisdom about Japan and about the Pacific war received little hearing within the academy. The eclipse of Fahs is perhaps most easily explained. His book dealt with a fairly narrow topic, appeared in 1940 only to be overtaken quickly by events, and was not followed up by subsequent writings on Japan. Embree remained a figure of importance in the field, but one suspects that his books were read more for their descriptive anthropology than for their history. Without major popular success and without an academic post to speak from, Mears dropped most completely off the map, figuring rarely on reading lists or in footnotes.

When the received wisdom was attacked, it was less by academic Japanists than by outsiders. Charles A. Beard published his two-volume attack on Franklin D. Roosevelt's Pacific policy in 1946 and 1948. Paul W. Schroeder published his incisive analysis of American diplomacy in 1958. William A. Williams published the first edition of *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* in 1958. In many ways, all these books harked to an important prewar publication, again by a non-Japanist, A. Whitney Griswold's *The Far Eastern Policy of the United States* (1938). However, it is difficult to find any impact of these books in the writings of the mainstream academic Japanists.

**Cross-Cultural Understanding:**

**Some Conclusions**

The experience of the American Japanists of the 1940s suggests that the key to accurate cross-cultural perception lies in the nature of one's commitments at home. Benedict had suggested as much in *Chrysanthemum*: “The study of comparative religions has flourished only when men are secure enough in their own convictions to be unusually generous. They might be Jesuits or Arabic savants or unbelievers, but they could not be zealots” (1946: 15-16). So with the study of cultures, she suggested, scholars who are “so defensive about their own way of life that it appears to them to be by definition the sole situation in the world . . . will never know the added love of their own culture which comes from a knowledge of other ways of life.”

Benedict would not have considered herself a zealot; but we have seen that her domestic commitments did skew her portrait of Japan.
This was also the case with Maki and Reischauer. Indeed, on closer examination, Benedict's stated goal itself becomes suspect: "the added love of [one's] own culture which comes from a knowledge of other ways of life." Implicit here is the assumption that there is no better way of life than one's own.

Benedict, Maki, Reischauer, Fahs, Embree, Mears—all were secure in their own convictions about the United States. However, not all allowed their domestic commitments to skew their views of foreign reality. Why not? I offer several related factors in explanation. First, there is the inverse relation between our views of ourselves and our views of others. Maki, Reischauer, and, in her writings on Japan, Benedict were largely committed at home. Fahs, Embree, and Mears were sufficiently critical of America and democracy that they could take an empathetic view of Japan. They did not drop their criticism of America "at the water's edge."

Second, Fahs, Embree, and Mears set Japan into global frameworks which transcended both Japan and America; not so the others. To be sure, Reischauer's Manichean vision also had its global aspects; and Maki and Benedict clearly believed that democracy was a global good. But there remains a qualitative difference between the models of Fahs, Embree, and Mears and those of Benedict, Maki, and Reischauer.

A third factor is an element about which most intellectuals find it difficult to talk: love. In 1978 actress Carol Channing responded (1978) to a question which might have been asked of American Japanists in the 1940s: "If you choose a character for his or her inner conflict and are enthralled with him or her intellectually but you don't like her, how would you approach it and play it?" Channing responded: "Oh, you have to be in love with your character. I've been fortunate enough to be in love with every character I've ever played, even the most terrible flops. No, you have to be, otherwise you don't get the character accurately... It won't work, you don't get it, the character isn't there. Nobody recognizes her if you don't do it with all love." Those of us involved in cross-cultural understanding do not often think of ourselves as actors and actresses; but in interpreting another culture for our own culture, our work is perhaps not so different from the labor of re-creating a character for an audience. Is it possible in the absence of love to live

9. In Japanese the words for actor and translator are homonyms. Keene (1971: 329) offers an original pun, *yakusha wa yakusha* (translators are actors) as a "suitably obscure" yet positive challenge to the Italian *traduttore, traditore* (translators, traducers). The analogy with acting holds true, I submit, for anyone who attempts to interpret one culture to another.
oneself into a foreign reality, to translate that foreign reality into one’s own language, to carry one’s readers along into an empathetic experience of that foreign reality?

Of the Japanists discussed in this essay, Mears and Embree respond to Japan with love. In *Year of the Wild Boar*, Mears’ account of her trip to Japan in 1935, she personalizes the issues, and her readers come to know well a series of very individual Japanese: Akiko, Chiyo, Tama, Tsuki, Nobu, Mr. Sato, and Mr. Muro. In part, of course, this personalization is a rhetorical device; but it is also quite clear that Mears reacted warmly and humanly to the Japanese she met.

Much the same is true of Embree, who dedicated *Suye Mura* (1939: xxiii) “to the memory of Keisuke Aiko—scholar, gentleman, and good judge of wine.” Moreover, in his preface Embree thanks the village as a whole: “More than to any official or professor, however, I owe thanks to the people of Suye who so cordially received two foreigners in their midst and with whom both my wife and I formed many a warm friendship. International friendship was never at a higher point than during some of Suye’s drinking parties of 1935-36.” Moreover, in his posthumous appreciation of Embree, John Pelzel recalls (1950: 221) that Embree “derived a deep pleasure . . . from being with peoples of different race and culture. And his understanding, and indeed love, for them awakened an answer on their part.”

There is only limited evidence concerning the personal reactions of any of the others. Fahs kept personal comments in his writing to a minimum. Benedict never traveled to Japan. Maki did, but like Fahs he refrains from commenting in a personal vein. Reischauer was born in Japan and lived there until the age of 17; but to judge from his writings then and since, he never lost his heart or his head. In his recent book, *The Japanese* Reischauer recalls (1977: 405) his reaction to the Pacific war. The Japanese practice of treating outsiders like outsiders “proved an aid to me in keeping clear my own American identity. It was particularly helpful in the years of confrontation and war between the United States and Japan, for it precluded any possible emotional conflict.” Had Reischauer experienced emotional conflict, we are tempted to speculate, he might have written very differently in the 1940s about Japan.10

10. It is instructive to consider the contrast between Reischauer’s statement, long after the fact though it is, and a comment E. H. Norman made in a letter to his parents in 1932, at the time of the Manchurian Incident (Taylor, 1977: 111): “Poor Japan! I feel all the fierce unreasoning loyalty one does to one’s native land, but I cannot stomach that Bushido rot.” As a Canadian, Norman falls outside the scope of this essay.
Thus, the Japanists who are engaged personally with Japan, who respond with love, are those whose picture of Japan is least biased; and the Japanists who are not so engaged, who speak less of people and more of ideologies and cultures, are those whose picture of Japan is most ethnocentric and skewed. Of course, love can be as blinding as any other strong bias; but if understanding across cultural lines is at stake, then love can be both an energizing force and a safeguard against easy condescension.

The Pacific war was the best of times for American Japanists. Most escaped from their classrooms to positions of influence in Washington. Before they lectured students; now they affected policy. For this heady elevation, they paid a price. That price was the inability to detach themselves from the atmosphere of wartime Washington.

Their loss of objectivity concerning Japan was a function of their loss of objectivity concerning the United States. Randolph Bourne wrote of World War I as a time of faith, a faith he did not share. World War II was another such time, an era of American crusade. Crusade and dispassionate observation stand in opposition. In this sense, the Pacific war was the worst of times for American studies of Japan. Indeed, it may be the case that our cross-cultural understanding in general, not simply our understanding of the immediate enemy Japan, suffered during World War II.

Perhaps the maxim is right: Hindsight gives us all 20/20 vision. If it holds true in this case, it is because present circumstances are far different from the circumstances of the 1940s. Instead of a military triumph and high patriotic ardor, we have recent military defeat and widespread domestic unease. But the dark cloud of America’s current discontent may have its silver lining. If our goal is accurate perception across cultural boundaries, the best of times may be the worst of times, and the worst of times may be the best of times. Times of crusade and certainty are less conducive to such knowledge than times of soul-searching and self-doubt.

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