

## **Helen Keller's Civil Diplomacy in Japan in 1937 and 1948**

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This article analyzes Helen Keller's civil diplomacy in U.S.-Japan relations through her visits to Japan in 1937 and 1948. In 1937, Keller visited Japan and Manchukuo (Japan's puppet state in Manchuria) at the moment when the Marco Polo Bridge incident was poised to break out. Keller was welcomed in Japan by the Japanese emperor, the prime minister and other government officials. She delivered a letter from President Roosevelt that reconfirmed America's friendship with Japan. American ambassador to Japan, Joseph Grew, described Keller as one of the most successful American diplomats. Keller's trip was even extended to Korea and Manchukuo, which were under Japan's occupation at that time. Although the promotion of welfare was her purpose, Keller's trip to Manchukuo was enthusiastically supported by the Japanese government and by the Kwantung Army, eager to explain Japan's policy in northern China to the United States. In 1948, only three years after the Pacific War ended, Helen Keller was invited to Japan a second time. She toured over thirty cities across the nation, inspiring MacArthur to improve U.S.-Japan relations. As Keller toured ruined Hiroshima and Nagasaki, met Emperor Hirohito, shook hands with hundreds of thousands Japanese citizens, mutual perceptions and public opinion in Japan and the United States started changing. Emperor Hirohito was portrayed as the benevolent leader of a new democratic Japan, a man who understood the significance of welfare for the disabled. Hiroshima and Nagasaki citizens interpreted Keller's trip to their cities as an America attempt at atonement. Keller's successful civil diplomacy in Japan made the U.S. State Department recognize her as their most effective symbol of America and so a valuable political asset.

**Keywords:** Helen Keller, civil diplomacy, U.S.-Japan relations, cultural diplomacy, Japan's military aggression, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, MacArthur, blind, public opinion

### **Introduction**

"All citizens can serve as diplomats." That was the message from President Eisenhower, who launched the People to People program at the height of the Cold War with the purpose of enhancing America's image and idealism around the world by way of countering the Soviet Union's cultural propaganda campaign. The CIA provided funds to various cultural and

private philanthropic organizations, and recruited to the programs prominent American citizens such as jazz musicians, writers like William Faulkner and many other cultural figures. Those selected as “citizen diplomats” were dispatched overseas by the State Department to convey the American government’s message and promote America’s good will. Among those “civilian ambassadors,” the State Department had an unusual interest in Helen Keller. She was often voted the most admired women in the world and symbol of America. State Department records in 1948 asserted that “the prestige of the U.S. can be advanced by assisting Miss Keller to receive as favorable introduction as possible to the peoples of the countries she and her party may visit.”<sup>1</sup>

Helen Keller was asked to promote American democracy across the world. In 1951, she went to South Africa and publicly criticized racial apartheid. In 1952, she visited Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Israel at the behest of the Near Eastern Affairs Division of the State Department. In 1953 she toured Latin America, visiting Brazil, Chile, Peru, Mexico, and Panama. In 1955, her trips were extended to India, Pakistan, Burma and the Philippines due to America’s concern about anti-American and pro-Communist movements in that area. Undoubtedly, the U.S. government considered Helen Keller to be America’s most effective propagandizing agent. Her good-will visits would have an enormous psychological impact and be favorable to the U.S. during the Cold War. Helen Keller’s impact was all the greater as an extraordinary civilian leader, who had conquered blindness and deafness. The U.S. government had taken heed of her diplomatic skills ever since her tours of Japan in 1937 and 1948. The State Department quickly recognized Keller as a most effective symbol of American idealism and considered her as a political asset. In 1937, when U.S.-Japan relations started deteriorating over the issue of Manchuria, Helen Keller visited Japan where she was welcomed by Emperor Hirohito and Prime Minister Hayashi Senjūrō 林銑十郎. She delivered a letter from President Franklin Roosevelt that reconfirmed America’s friendship with Japan. American ambassador to Japan, Joseph Grew, described Helen Keller as one of America’s most successful diplomats. Keller’s tour was even extended to Korea and Manchukuo. On the occasion of her second trip to Japan in 1948, Keller toured the ruins Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some Hiroshima citizens observed Keller’s trip to the city as America’s campaign of atonement. This paper offers a critical assessment of Keller’s civil diplomacy in Japan.

### **Helen Keller in Japan 1937**

Helen Keller was invited to Japan for the first time in 1937 by her sightless friend Iwahashi Takeo 岩橋武夫, professor at Kwansei Gakuin University 関西学院大学 and the founder of Japan Lighthouse for the Blind. Keller and Iwahashi had developed their friendship since 1934 when Iwahashi visited Keller’s house in Forest Hill, NY and persuaded her to come to Japan. He was convinced her presence would inspire blind people in Japan, and help change Japan’s social welfare system and raise public awareness of the handicapped. Keller’s teacher Anne Sullivan, who was then on her deathbed, also pushed Keller to promise to “be a light-bringer to the handicapped of Japan” after she was gone. Three years later, on 15 April 1937, Helen Keller sailed into Yokohama Bay on the *Asama maru* 浅間丸. Keller’s arrival was reported in all national newspapers and radio programs in Japan with excitement and sensation.

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1 General Records 1948.

Everything she did and said were reported, and she was called “Saint Keller” or “Saint of the three burdens (of blindness, deafness and muteness)” (*seijo Kerā joshi* 聖女ケラー女史 or *sanjūku no seibo* 三重苦の聖母). The physically handicapped in Japan saw her as a savior who had come to bring them light and hope from across the Pacific.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, Keller's visit to Japan was made in the midst of Japan's expansion into northeast China, and so at a politically sensitive moment of U.S.-Japan relations. Following the Manchurian incident of 1931 and the establishment of Manchukuo in 1932, the American government changed its view on Japan's action in China. By January 1932, Henry Stimson, Secretary of State, was informing Japan that the U.S. would not recognize any change in Manchuria's status. When the Lytton Commission report later condemned Japan's aggression in Manchuria, and recommended that Manchuria be restored to Chinese rule, Tokyo responded with fury. Its representatives walked out of the League of Nations and Japan withdrew its membership in 1933. Franklin D. Roosevelt's first approach to Japan was not to pressure Japan through economic sanctions, but to provide additional financial and military aid to China. The U.S. offered at least \$50 million credit and U.S. airplanes and pilots to Chiang Kai-shek's China. Japan responded with the idea of a Japanese Monroe doctrine for Asia through the so-called Amō statement (*Amō seimei* 天羽声明). Japan's ambitions in China undermined relations with the U.S., and led to its isolation from the Western world.<sup>3</sup>

Helen Keller came to Japan when Japanese leaders were hoping to repair relations with the U.S. After all, the U.S. was the main exporter to Japan of natural resources and raw materials, essential for Japan's military expansion on the continent. Keller's two initial weeks in Tokyo, included numerous activities. On her first day, she attended the annual imperial cherry blossom viewing party in the Shinjuku imperial gardens. The guest list of eight thousand included princes and princesses, senior government members, the diplomatic corps, and military men. Keller was received in audience by Emperor Hirohito and Empress Nagako. It was an extremely rare privilege for a foreign visitor to be acknowledged by the emperor, who was charmed by Helen Keller. She was entertained by nobility and was praised as noble, and was called a holy woman (*seijo* 聖女). Helen Keller recalled this honorable moment at Shinjuku imperial garden. “At this minute an incident that I cannot forget happened. Both the Emperor and the Empress stood besides me. The Emperor shook hands gently. In his hands I felt grace. He gave me a few words through translation. I answered this is such an honorable moment in my life that I cannot find words for my appreciation.”<sup>4</sup>

An article in the *Asahi shinbun* reported that Helen Keller was allowed the rare privilege of touching the kimono of Princess Takamatsu no Miya, sister of Empress Nagako, because she could not see, touching was her way to recognition.<sup>5</sup> Helen Keller was duly impressed and told reporters that she saw the symbol of Japanese women in Princess Takamatsu no Miya, and that she would share the happiness the princess gave to her with those who experienced the same disabilities as she did. Keller also stressed the princess's keen interest in welfare for the blind.<sup>6</sup>

The Japanese Foreign Ministry treated Keller as an official U.S. envoy because she carried a letter of good will from President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Japanese government

2 Seki 1983.

3 LaFeber 1998.

4 *Asahi shinbun*, 17 April 1937.

5 *Asahi shinbun*, 17 April 1937.

6 *Asahi shinbun*, 17 April 1937.

held an official reception for her on 17 April 1937. Prime Minister Hayashi, Foreign Minister Satō Naotake 佐藤尚武, Home Minister Kawarada Kakichi 河原田稼吉, the governor of Tokyo prefecture, the mayor of Tokyo, Prince Tokugawa Iesato 徳川家達, Marquis Ōkubo 大久保侯爵 and Baron Shidehara 幣原男爵 attended the reception for Helen Keller, who was escorted there by Ambassador Grew. The letter from President Roosevelt commissioned Keller to deliver a message of good will to the Japanese people through Premier Hayashi. In his letter, Roosevelt described Helen Keller as a “pioneer in human affairs” and expressed his hope that “Keller’s visit to Japan would be the spirit of friendship and good will between American people and the people of Japan upon which good international relations must rest.”<sup>7</sup>

During Keller’s stay in Japan, Iwahashi arranged frequent meetings for her with Japanese government officials. Although Iwahashi’s Japan Lighthouse for the Blind took the initiative in organizing Keller’s visit to Japan, Iwahashi also received instructions from the Cultural Division of the Japanese Foreign Ministry. Well in advance of Keller’s arrival, the Helen Keller reception committee was established under the chairmanship of Prince Tokugawa Iesato, the president of the House of Peers and 16th in line from the first Tokugawa shogun. The reception committee received support from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Home Affairs, and arranged Helen Keller’s two month lecture tour across the Japanese archipelago.<sup>8</sup> On 18 April 1937, Keller had a private meeting with Prime Minister Hayashi. In their informal conversation, Hayashi used the expression “spiritual eye be bright,” (*shingan meirō* 心眼明朗) meaning that those deprived of their vital senses can lead a bright life if they open the eyes of their soul. In Buddhism, the word *sangan* 三眼 (three eyes) refers to the two visible eyes, which are open horizontally, as well as the *shingan*, the third eye, which opens vertically on the forehead. Hayashi’s expression paralleled the idea in the West of combining insight with hindsight and transcending intuition or rationale. Keller introduced the Hayashi episode in her later lectures at Hibiya Public Hall, which deeply moved Hayashi. He was persuaded that Keller was able to grasp the Japanese spirit and understand Japan better than any other foreigners.<sup>9</sup>

Ambassador Grew also used the occasion of Keller’s visit to articulate his high expectation of Japan’s domestic peace and stability under the Hayashi cabinet. He said, “For the moment it might almost appear that there is a tendency to revert to the Shidehara diplomacy and that the moderate influences in the country are possibly more influential.”<sup>10</sup> He went so far as to comment that Keller’s reception was a demonstration by the moderates against extremists in the army. In a private report to the U.S. Secretary of State, forwarded to President Roosevelt, Grew wrote: “The extent to which the achievements of Miss Keller, a woman of no official standing, appealed to the Japanese nation has been amply evidenced by the warm reception, largely official, which has been given her.”<sup>11</sup>

Helen Keller’s visit helped counter the negative image Japanese had of Americans’ materialistic nature, racial prejudice toward non-whites, and individualism. On 17 April 1937, Keller gave a speech at a welcome party cosponsored by the *Asahi shinbun* and the Tokyo Women’s Association (Kantō Fujin Rengōkai 関東婦人連合会) at Hibiya Public

7 FDR to Keller 1937.

8 Consulate General 1937.

9 Rhoden and Hooper 1978, p. 27.

10 *Asahi shinbun*, 23 April 1937.

11 Grew 1937.

Auditorium. It was entitled "Light and Hope." Following the national anthem, Keller stood on the stage next to the American and Japanese flags, and said: "I feel the warmth of the sun . . . Love is power. Power is love. Let power and love build an independent and happy life for the physically handicapped. Let the light of sympathy brighten up the darkness of their lives." The *Asahi shinbun* reported that the audience of 3,000 shed tears on hearing the "miraculous voice" of Helen Keller. She received flowers and dolls from Nakamura Hisako 中村久子, a little girl who had no arms or legs. Keller said to the Japanese audience that, although she could not see the flowers, she could enjoy their fragrance. Though she could not see the stars, she had a bright star in her heart.<sup>12</sup>

From the middle of April to the beginning of July, Keller undertook a nationwide lecture tour in order to promote public awareness and understanding of the blind. She visited over thirty nine cities and gave ninety seven lectures, attracting huge audiences wherever she went. Gilbert Bowles, the director of Friends of Japan, believed that no one had exerted more influence on public opinion than Helen Keller, and that her nationwide tour was perhaps the most widespread, vital, and impressive demonstration of creative love and good will that the Japanese nation had ever witnessed.<sup>13</sup>

As a result, the major Japanese conglomerates like Sumitomo contributed to social welfare programs in support of Helen Keller's campaign. In Kobe, Keller was hosted by Baron Sumitomo, head of the conglomerate. The Baron arranged for a special cook from Oriental Hotel to cook for Keller during her stay in Kobe, and provided his villa for her use. Keller called Baron Sumitomo Japan's Rockefeller or the "knight of the blind," and her praise of Sumitomo's generous hospitality and kindness were written up by the mass media in the United States in their articles on Keller's time in Japan.<sup>14</sup>

When Iwahashi and members of the Helen Keller Committee planned in 1934 Keller's visit to Japan, they envisioned it serving two major purposes. First of all, it would enhance awareness of the blind among the Japanese. Her presence attracted great attention among the Japanese media and in government. Keller's presence convinced Japanese people that the handicapped could, if given a chance, come to lead useful lives and be happy. Her visit prompted a national call by blind citizens and their supporters for greater governmental attention to the welfare of the blind. Iwahashi and his staff members were able to establish the Tokyo chapter of Japan Lighthouse, thanks to the Helen Keller campaign, which had brought in increased financial aid.

Secondly, the campaign sought to improve U.S.-Japan relations. A leader of the National Association for the Blind (Zen Nihon Mōjinkai 全日本盲人会) said, "Dr. Helen Keller's visit to Japan has already exerted more influence than any other good-will mission on America-Japanese relations."<sup>15</sup> Helen Keller received many letters from Japanese thanking her for her visit. A fifteen year old girl named Yamashita Yoshiko wrote in English, a language she had just started to study, that she was so inspired by Keller's story and her visit to Japan that she had decided to become a good, respectful Christian woman.<sup>16</sup> The news of the Helen Keller campaign was widely reported in China as well. The class

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12 *Asahi shinbun*, 18 April 1937.

13 Bowles 1945.

14 Extracts from Letters 1937.

15 Migel to FDR 1937.

16 Yamashita to Keller 1937.

of 1937 of Rulison High School in Jiujiang, Jiangxi province wrote to her asking if she would visit China.<sup>17</sup>

Keller had an enduring memory of a beautiful Japan. She wrote: “Most of all, I have been moved by the love of the people that followed me from city to city. I have been showered with beautiful welcome and pleasant remembrance which I shall cherish all the rest of my life.” Keller likened Japan to a big bouquet of loveliness over “which my fingers wander in delight.”<sup>18</sup> During her trip in Japan, Helen Keller corresponded with John Finley, her friend and the editor of the *New York Times*. She wrote to Finley that she would do her best to strengthen the bonds of amity between Japan and the United States. She urged Finley to write “one of your precious paragraphs of good will toward other countries,” which he did.<sup>19</sup> The *New York Times* gave extensive coverage to Keller’s travels through Japan, portraying a country of stunning beauty with its cherry blossoms and describing the receptive minds of the Japanese people.

The story of Helen Keller’s visit to Japan moved Washington officials as well. At the Independence Day reception held at the American Embassy in Tokyo, Ambassador Grew praised Keller’s mission: “Never before has an American created so great an atmosphere of friendship in Japan.” Grew called Keller the second Admiral Perry saying, “He opened the door with fear and suspicion, she has done it with love and affection.” The English language newspaper *Japan Advertiser* reported Grew’s comments.<sup>20</sup> The newspapers quoted the ambassador’s evaluation of Keller’s good will: “Not only has she immensely aided the cause of the blind and disabled in this country but also has tremendously furthered friendly relations between Japan and the United States.”<sup>21</sup> Keller’s trip to Japan in 1937 was evidence of her incomparable international stature, and of the influence that she could bring to bear in international relations.

### Helen Keller in Manchuria

Following her two and half month tour of Japan in 1937, Keller extended her itinerary to Korea and Manchuria, at the suggestion of Iwahashi and the Helen Keller Committee. On 13 July, she arrived in Soul (Keijō 京城) and held a press conference at Chosen Hotel with Iwahashi as translator. She said to reporters: “The salvation of the blind and the deaf, that is the mission for the large civilized nation.” She said that she wanted to set up more schools and institutions for the compulsory education of blind students in Korea. Keller was warmly greeted by Minami Jirō, 南次郎, governor general of Korea and invited to a dinner reception. Although Keller’s stay in Korea was only three days, her public lectures inspired audiences. She received Korean grapes and a typewriter as gifts from the Christian Youth Association (Kirisutokyō Seinenkai 基督教青年会). On 15 July, she left Korea for Manchuria.<sup>22</sup> Keller wrote a lengthy report to M.C. Migel, the president of the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), in which she described her impressions of Manchuria.

17 Rulison High School 1937.

18 *Japan Advertiser*, 6 July 1937.

19 Nielsen 2004, p. 66.

20 *Japan Advertiser*, 6 July 1937.

21 *Japan Advertiser*, 6 July 1937.

22 *Chōsen shinbun*, 14 July 1937; *Keijō shinbun*, 14 July 1937.

She wrote about the colorful Chinese quarters and castle towns of Mukden and Dalian 大連: “Manchuria fascinated me as a land being reclaimed from the desert, after the age long terror of brigands and ignorance.”<sup>23</sup> At this time, Manchukuo was one of the most modern nations in Asia with magnificent architectural structures in the central plaza of the capital Xinjing 新京 as well as an efficient network of utilities such as gas, electricity, and telephone. The city also boasted parks, sports centers, a zoo, city gardens, and a number of hospitals and schools. The major cities in Manchukuo, from Dalian to Xinjing, the state capital, were connected by Japan’s fastest air-conditioned Asia Express, which operated at a speed of 100 km per hour. Matching the railway technology of the West, Japan’s Asia Express was the symbol of Manchukuo, the ultra-modern state of the empire of Japan.

After arriving in Andong 安東 in Manchuria, with her secretary, Polly Thomson and Iwahashi, Keller gave her first public lecture at Andong Women’s High School on 17 July 1937. In her lecture, she talked about the objectives of her visit:

I hope that we can establish here educational institutions for the people like me. I hope especially that we can open vocational training centers to train adults to be able to live independently. I want to share my joy, pleasure, gratitude, and anxieties with the people in Manchukuo, whose fate is similar to mine. I want to send my sincere love to the people of Manchukuo. My hope for Manchukuo is that it may find the strength to rise above its anxieties.<sup>24</sup>

Keller headed next to Fengtian 奉天 on 19 July, and appeared at a press conference held in Yamato Hotel, where she made the following comments on Japan’s role in Manchuria:

The new state of Manchuria was for decades without social stability; its people had experienced the sort of blindness that I have throughout my life. Through the aid of good neighbor Japan, it has become the splendid utopian country it is today. The people have trod a similar path to my own. Owing to the kindness of those around me, I have been able to embark on a life of hope, overcoming all suffering and grasping the light ahead.<sup>25</sup>

Keller was referring here to Japan’s leadership in the field of welfare programs in Manchukuo. Her comments were, however, taken out of context and were widely published by the Japanese mass media, as if Japan had gained official American recognition for Manchuria. The fact was that a distinguished American had come to Manchukuo, toured it, and seemingly endorsed it. In the 1930s, Keller was greatly concerned at the growing war tensions in



Figure 1. Helen Keller (right) arrives at Manchukuo. *Manshū nichinichi shinbun*, 20 July 1937.

23 Keller to Migel 1937.

24 *Manshū nichinichi shinbun*, 20 July 1937.

25 *Hōten mainichi shinbun*, 19 July 1937.

Europe, and traveled frequently to European countries, too. She voiced her concerns regarding Hitler's growing power, harshly denouncing him and Mussolini for their militarism and totalitarian ideologies. She feared the implications of Hitler's rise to power for the Jews and people with disabilities. In contrast to her experiences in Europe, however, Keller's knowledge of Japanese history and politics was poor and most of her impression of Japan came from her reading of Lafcadio Hearn's books written in the nineteenth century.<sup>26</sup> On 23 July, Keller lectured once more on the necessity for social welfare programs for the blind, this time at the Manchurian Women's Association, in front of an audience of 1,500 at an event jointly sponsored by the South Manchuria Railroad Company, Dalian Municipal City Office, and Dalian Women's League. The city hall in Dalian was packed to overflowing. As Keller entered the hall, people got to their feet and sang *Kimi ga yo*, the Japanese national anthem. All Keller's public lectures and interviews were broadcast on the Manchurian radio news with Iwahashi acting as her interpreter.<sup>27</sup>

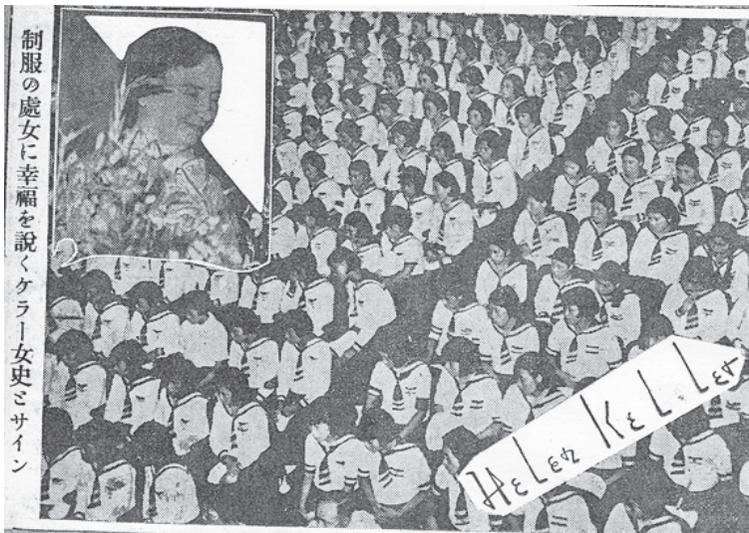


Figure 2. Helen Keller speaks at Dalian Women Students' League (23 July 1937, Manchukuo). *Manshū nichinichi shinbun*, 24 July 1937.

During her stay in Manchuria, Keller was guarded by the Kwantung Army. In particular, Matsuoka Yōsuke 松岡洋右, the president of South Manchurian Railway Company expended great care for her safety. Matsuoka was a strong supporter of Japan's aggressive stance in China. Loquacious and with an acute mind, this graduate of the University of Oregon spoke fluent English. Matsuoka had led the Japanese delegation that had walked out of the League of Nations in 1933. Through his public speeches and writings, Matsuoka explained to the Japanese people that Japan stood alone in the hostile Western world. He coined the term "lifeline," implying that Japan's fate was bound to northeastern China because Manchuria was vital to Japan's survival.<sup>28</sup> The term was picked up by the press and

26 Iwahashi 1943.

27 *Manshū nichinichi shinbun*, 24 July 1937.

28 Matsuoka 1974.

gained currency through the 1930s and 1940s. Matsuoka, who was a staunch advocate of the East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere, supported Keller's tour in Manchuria; he saw it as an excellent opportunity to promote international recognition of Manchukuo.

Matsuoka understood the importance of social welfare programs as a technique to sway the local Chinese people and gain their support for Japan's rule. After the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese conflict in July 1937 and as Japan's military spread its influence across China, the Japanese military government faced the following issues: firstly, how to convince the local Chinese and Manchurian citizens of the necessity for expanding military ordnance production in Japanese controlled regions; and secondly, how to control anti-Japanese sentiment among Chinese and Manchurian citizens. In order to resolve these issues, the Japanese government relied on its social welfare program to smoothen the way.

While Keller was in Manchuria, Matsuoka urged Iwahashi to publish Keller's comments on how Japan had helped improve the social and educational system in Manchuria. In the *Manchurian Daily News*, an English newspaper published in Manchukuo, Iwahashi mentioned that Keller had "received dozens of requests by telegram and letter from U.S. publishers, magazine and newspaper editors for books and articles on Japan since she had arrived in Japan. She spent a few hours everyday typing her impressions and experiences. You would be surprised at how fast and accurately she can manipulate typewriter keys." Iwahashi wrote that Keller and Thomson would introduce "a real Japan to the American people, and the U.S. public would believe their reports as they trusted them. Keller would help bring Japan and America together without any suspicion of Japan's propaganda purpose. Such a mission could never be possible even with the expensive governmental ambassadorship."<sup>29</sup>

Iwahashi referred to Keller's tour in Manchuria as a pilgrimage intended to bring peace to Japan's frontier. Japanese mass media made much of the fact that Helen Keller ate *sashimi*, *sekihan* (sticky red bean rice), sour cucumber salad, steamed egg cake, drank the Japanese green tea known as *gyokuro* 玉露 and slept in a *tatami* room. Iwahashi at the press conference at Yamato Hotel in Dalian told the Japanese audience that Helen Keller understood Japan's political movements since the Manchurian incident, and she strongly believed that Japan's leadership in East Asia would bring happiness and a bright future for humanity. Iwahashi insisted that Keller's understanding of the current situation in Manchuria and elsewhere in East Asia was far more accurate than that of ordinary Japanese citizens.<sup>30</sup>

Nonetheless, Keller's visits to Korea and Manchuria were controversial from the perspective of the United States. This was firstly because the U.S. did not recognize Manchukuo; and secondly, there was growing concern about possible war in China. Indeed, M.C. Migel, director of the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), had attempted to cancel Keller's tour of Manchuria even as she went about lecturing. Keller, however, insisted on going to Manchuria as a part of her extended tour of Japan. No sooner had she arrived in Manchuria, however, than Japan launched a full-scale war in China.

On 7 July 1937, Chinese and Japanese forces clashed at Marco Polo Bridge, south of Beijing. The Japanese military was convinced the incident was only the start of a Chinese offensive supported by the Soviets. Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro 近衛文麿, who expected a quick local settlement, sent reinforcements in. Ishiwaru Kanji 石原莞爾, one of the

<sup>29</sup> Iwahashi 1943, p. 176.

<sup>30</sup> *Manshū nichinichi shinbun*, 18 July 1937.

Kwantung Army officers who had planned the Mukden incident in 1931, warned that Japan had made a wrong move. He warned Konoe to focus on the issues within Manchuria and not expand Japan's influence beyond. Against Ishiwara's advice, however, Japan embarked on war with no clear long-term objective.<sup>31</sup>

Keller wrote, "Wherever we go, we heard the crowds shouting 'banzai, banzai' as the troops march northward." They were heading across major cities in Manchukuo including Mukden and Dalian. During the last month of her tour, she traveled in darkened trains and spoke in darkened auditoriums as a precaution against air raids. Meanwhile as the war escalated, Keller's trip to Xinjing, where she was to have met Henry Pu Yi, the Manchukuo emperor, was cancelled. In addition, her tour of China was also cancelled in August 1937 just before she departed for the United States.<sup>32</sup>

After the Manchurian incident, Japanese officials in Tokyo and the Kwantung Army officers in Manchukuo were keenly conscious of the fact that international opinion was against them. This was why they had collaborated in planning Helen Keller's campaign in Manchuria. They had hoped to influence the minds of U.S. policy makers as to what Japan was doing for other Asians in China. Upon her return to the United States, Helen Keller was distressed by the strife in China. She wrote: "terrible situation will advance to a distant date the coming of permanent peace. Japan demeaned itself as a world bandit and seized Manchukuo."<sup>33</sup> Keller, while criticizing Japanese imperialism, did mention that Manchukuo had developed and been "disciplined" by Japan to become a vigorous, self-governing state.<sup>34</sup>

When news of the Manchurian incident finally reached the ears of politicians in Washington, Roosevelt took a weak stance. Nevertheless, the U.S. administration was divided. One faction, led by Stanley Hornbeck, chief of the State Department Division of Far Eastern Affairs (1928–37) and a special adviser to Secretary of State, and Henry Morgenthau, secretary of the National Treasury, suggested protecting U.S. interests in China through military and economic build up and in order to force Japan to back down.<sup>35</sup> They did not think that Japan had the audacity to confront the United States. The other faction led by Secretary of State Cordell Hull and U.S. ambassador to Japan Joseph Grew were opposed and warned that such tactics could lead to all-out war or weaken the moderate factions in the Konoe government, which were attempting to rein in the militarists. In August and September 1937, the British government approached President Roosevelt with the idea of jointly imposing economic sanctions on Japan. Grew strongly opposed the idea of officially supporting China against Japan. As a result, the president, instead of supporting Britain, condemned international lawlessness in China.<sup>36</sup>

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31 Pettie 1975.

32 Keller to Migel 1937.

33 Keller to Migel 1937.

34 Keller to Migel 1937.

35 LaFeber 1998, p. 184.

36 LaFeber 1998, p. 184.

### Helen Keller's Second Visit to Japan in 1948

Helen Keller responded to the news of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor with outrage, as virtually all Americans did at that time. On the other hand, Iwahashi Takeo in Japan set up a military factory inside of his Lighthouse, so blinded Japanese veterans could work to produce electric parts for airplanes, radio parts for aircraft carriers. Keller meanwhile corresponded with President Roosevelt frequently, and publicly supported his policy of Anglo-American unity and collaboration with the Soviet Union against Germany and Japan. During World War II, Keller promoted welfare services for blinded U.S. war veterans. She visited seventy army and navy hospitals. Her visits served as an inspiration to the men who had been newly disabled in the war. The communication between Iwahashi and Keller across the Pacific ceased until Japan's surrender.<sup>37</sup> On 28 June 1946, Iwahashi was awakened by a call from Major Charles Mullins in GHQ, Osaka branch. The major told Iwahashi that General Douglas MacArthur had received a message from Helen Keller, who was concerned for Iwahashi's safety, asking GHQ to support Iwahashi's work for the blind in Japan. In her letter, Keller wrote "finally the moment that we can re-communicate our friendship arrived."<sup>38</sup> Iwahashi immediately replied requesting that she return to Japan to encourage the goodness of humanity, and highlight the plight of blind people. Keller responded that she and her secretary Polly Thompson were planning a world tour to visit China, India, Austria, and the Middle East under the sponsorship of the John Milton Society for the Blind, and a visit to Japan could be included into their itinerary.<sup>39</sup>

In December 1947, Keller wrote to MacArthur about the purpose of her visit to Japan, insisting that blind Japanese needed her to lift them out of the double tragedy of war and the loss of sight. At the same time, Iwahashi appealed to Prime Minister Katayama Tetsu 片山哲, the first socialist prime minister and a Christian, seeking the Japanese government's support for his campaign for the blind. In January 1948, the *Mainichi shinbun* declared its sponsorship for public lectures and charity campaigns to support Iwahashi's project of inviting Keller to Japan.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, the Helen Keller Campaign Committee (HKC) was established and held its first meeting at the St. Paul Club at Mainichi Hall with representatives from GHQ, who also promised to support Iwahashi. The committee passed a resolution to launch a nationwide Helen Keller's tour of love for the people in distress under the slogan "Let Miss Keller initiate the light to illuminate the dark places in Japan." The committee decided to hold lectures at over eleven major cities in Japan, institute a Helen Keller Fund as a permanent relief organization for social welfare, and organize a national league of sightless people in Japan. The senior members of the committee were Colonel Crawford Sams, chief of the public health and welfare section of GHQ, Miles W. Vaughn, the vice president of United Press for Asia, Katayama Tetsu, the Japanese prime minister and the chairman of the Japanese Socialist Party, Prince Takamatsu, Morito Tatsuo 森戸辰男, the education minister, Ashida Hitoshi 芦田均, the foreign minister, and Hitotsumatsu Sadayoshi 一松定吉, the welfare minister.<sup>41</sup>

37 Nihon Lighthouse 2002, pp. 36–38.

38 Keller to MacArthur 1947.

39 Wheeler 1947.

40 Keller to MacArthur 1947.

41 Iwahashi 1948.

Prior to Keller's arrival, Iwahashi and GHQ staff from MacArthur's headquarter worked together to plan her reception on arrival in Japan. According to Iwahashi Takeo's son, Hideyuki, MacArthur selected Iwakuni in Yamaguchi prefecture for Helen Keller's landing place because of its proximity to Hiroshima where the first A-bomb was dropped. Thus, Keller's visit as the symbol of peace and people's ambassador from the United States became even more significant.<sup>42</sup> On 29 August 1948, the Keller party was met in Iwakuni by various SCAP military officers. Nelson Neff and Captain Lane Carlson of SCAP's health and welfare section were placed in charge of Keller's visit, and traveled with her and Iwahashi. Carlson even placed an ambulance at their disposal. At the railway station in Iwakuni, Japanese people and school children crowded to see Keller.<sup>43</sup>

Two days later in Tokyo, Keller and Iwahashi visited MacArthur, who hosted a lunch for them in his residency. He thanked Iwahashi and Keller for their commitment to social welfare in Japan. He told Keller that her visit would bring great hope for the Japanese people and handicapped, who were struggling to recover from the physical and mental devastation of the war. According to historian John Dower, MacArthur almost never socialized with Japanese. Only sixteen Japanese ever spoke with him more than once, and none of those was under the rank of premier and chief minister.<sup>44</sup> If this is true, Iwahashi was one of the few Japanese civilians who met MacArthur individually. Keller said, "I am truly happy that I have been able to serve as his cup-bearer of hope to the handicapped in Japan." Keller called MacArthur's attempt to rebuild Japan out of ashes "another miracle." She was also full of praise for MacArthur's role in emancipating Japanese women, stating "women are the heart of any nation." Helen Keller and MacArthur respected each other and exchanged views on the future of postwar Japan.<sup>45</sup>

At the welcome ceremony in Tokyo, a letter from U.S. President Harry Truman was read. Originally, Truman had declined to entrust to Keller his letter to the Japanese people, saying that he made it a rule to do so only through official diplomatic and military channels, but eventually he yielded on learning that Keller had received an official invitation to Japan from MacArthur.<sup>46</sup> On 6 September, Keller was invited to luncheon at the Imperial Palace since Prince Takamatsu, younger brother of Emperor Hirohito, was a sponsor of her visit. Helen Keller wrote:

None one was more astonished than I at the manner in which all disguises of aloofness had been dropped between the throne and the public. Polly and I were actually asked to call on their majesties and their daughters. The princess spoke words of greeting soft[ly] as music that I read by touching their lips. The princess greeted me as if no such thing as rank or class existed.<sup>47</sup>

The meeting between Keller and Hirohito was widely reported in Japanese media and helped promote Hirohito's new image as a democratic emperor, who was concerned for the

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42 Iwahashi 1980.

43 *Mainichi shinbun*, 24 February 1948.

44 Dower 1999, p. 204.

45 Keller to MacArthur 1948.

46 Hassett 1948.

47 Keller to *Mainichi shinbun* 1948.

welfare of his people. Immediately after the U.S. Occupation of Japan started, MacArthur decided to retain Hirohito on his throne in order to maintain unity among the Japanese and prevent guerilla warfare against the Occupation forces. News reports covering Helen Keller's visit to the imperial palace stressed the emperor's liberation from his former image as leader of wartime Japan.

Including government officials, U.S. army groups, and private groups, the number of people who came to see Keller at various occasions would be approximately two million. Publicity extended to the remotest areas of Japan. At a meeting in Sapporo, the Sapporo mayor told Keller that if his eyes could help her work, he would be ready to give them. Helen Keller wrote that the sincerity of his statement brought tears to her eyes. The *Mainichi shinbun* raised over 100 million yen to aid the blind in Japan. Iwahashi was able to organize a Japanese University Blind Student Association under the auspices of the Japan Helen Keller Society, sponsoring thirty three students to study at seventeen universities across Japan. The Helen Keller Scholarship Fund (Helen Keller Zaidan Shōgakukin ヘレンケラー財団奨学金) was created and made awards to students of 10,000 yen.<sup>48</sup>

In her lectures, Keller constantly called on social workers in Japan to take the initiative in the care of the blind and the deaf. She urged that social service agencies train the blind for employment. On 7 September, Keller participated in a meeting sponsored by the Japanese government, to discuss the future direction of the Japanese social welfare system with representatives from the Ministry of Education and Health and the Labor Department, SCAP officers, Japanese government leaders and the representatives from public schools. The Ministry of Labor started a weeklong campaign for the employment of handicapped from 1 September through 8 September. Its purpose was to urge employers to hire more handicapped workers on equal conditions. They also proposed establishing government-sponsored vocational training schools for the blind by October. The Helen Keller Committee commemorated 3 September as "Miss Keller's Day," hoping to mark the opening of a new age for the handicapped in Japan. The Helen Keller campaign in 1948 convinced the Japanese government that an article on the compulsory education for the blind should be included in laws for Japanese education.<sup>49</sup>

Keller's campaign not only enhanced Japanese awareness of the blind; it also stimulated civil diplomacy in U.S.-Japan relations at the grass roots level. For instance, Yoshida Akifumi 吉田啓文, who wrote the lyrics for the Helen Keller song, was invited to dinner with Keller at the Osaka Lighthouse. Tsuji Tokumitsu 辻徳光, the chef who prepared the Japanese cuisine was later invited to the United States. He became one of the earliest to introduce Japanese cuisine in the U.S. Keller described Tsuji's cooking as follows, "It was a veritable rainbow auguring well for your understanding. As I felt the dainty net of carrot skin on the toy fisherman's swelling and gave a little pull to the ribbon on the door, I sensed again all the joy and faith of a child in fairies."<sup>50</sup> The young men and women who helped Iwahashi organize Keller's tour were also later invited to the United States to study. One of them, Sasaki Chitose 佐々木千歳, who had worked as a translator on Keller's visit to Japan, entered Columbia University with a Fulbright Scholarship and later she visited Keller's house.

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48 Iwahashi 1951.

49 Iwahashi 1949.

50 Keller to Iwahashi 1952.

The friendship between Americans and Japanese was not limited to the people involved in Iwahashi's campaign, but further extended to relations between Japanese workers and their American colleagues at the SCAP office in Tokyo. For instance, an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* introduced an episode on Suzy, a young Japanese female employee in General Douglas MacArthur's headquarters. Suzy was a little girl when she lost her house, all her family possessions, and her mother Mrs. Nakamura during the bombing of Tokyo in the war. Her father Mr. Nakamura was a city official, but when the war ended he lost his job, and caught tuberculosis. Her entire family lived in a single rented room and in order to support them, Suzy went out to work at the navy dockyard in Yokohama. Suzy explained her hardship to an American member of staff at the SCAP: "Please understand, Captain, this is not the story of a private family. This is the story of all Japanese. Sometimes a little better, more often worse. We lost the war. We do not complain." When Keller visited the SCAP's Public Health and Welfare Office at Tokyo in 1948, Suzy begged her boss for permission to go and see her.

A tremendous crowd of Japanese and Americans had gathered in the lobby. Every Japanese in the building seemed to be there. The atmosphere was electric. Then she came. I had never seen Helen Keller before. I was totally unprepared for the experience. In her eyes was a light so bright, so happy, and so radiant it took our breath away. Without even thinking, we burst into applause. This was not ordinary applause. This was a moral and spiritual triumph. She looked around at all of us. I could not believe that she could not see our faces nor hear our spontaneous heartfelt tribute.<sup>51</sup>

Suzy later told her boss that Helen Keller inspired in her a new way to look at things. She was a new hope. Impressed by Helen Keller's human spirit and sympathetic to Suzy's hard life in postwar Japan, her American employer handed her an envelope containing 60,000 yen—almost a year's salary—to cover her father's medicine, X-rays, hospitals and foods. Trembling, Suzy took the envelope, tears welled up in her eyes. Her boss said: "Americans are like Miss Keller. The Japanese had accepted their misfortunes, they had endured poverty, illness, malnutrition, famines, earthquakes, and wars but now they have a new hope."<sup>52</sup>

On the occasion of Keller's second visit Japanese embraced a totally different image of Americans from that carried in war propaganda. As she toured Japanese cities, she conveyed the image of Americans as peace loving, benevolent, democratic people, contrasted to the wartime image of the individualistic and materialistic American. As Suzy's episode illustrates, Helen Keller's visit helped reduce Japanese hostility toward GHQ, and changed the former enemy's image as arrogant conquerors.

On 13 October 1948, Keller went to Hiroshima. Keller had read John Hersey's *Hiroshima* in advance, and had imagined the destruction of the city. Keller was afraid of how Hiroshima citizens might receive her visit and speech. In her public speech she acknowledged the cruel nemesis overtook the city but the new Japan espoused by the United States provided the solution and the redemption. "The new sense you are gaining of personal freedom and responsibility for the welfare of others and your adoption of the principles and

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51 Critchell 1956, p. 98.

52 Critchell 1956, p. 98.

practices of democracy. Then truly will your tragedy be a purification of your souls through public spirit and brotherhood.”<sup>53</sup>

In sum, Helen Keller seemed to justify the destruction of Hiroshima in response to Japanese military aggression and mismanagement in its foreign relations. She praised American democracy brought by the occupation as the solution to Japan's totalitarian society. How did Hiroshima's citizens respond? Instead of public protest, they listened to Keller's speech silently. She was given an “affectionate welcome,” and many gifts. Hiroshima mayor Hamai Shinzō 浜井信三 told Keller that she represented “the greatness of striving to overcome a threefold handicap. We of Hiroshima are now striving to follow the path that you have trodden.” Hamai said that Keller was a model for postwar Japan.<sup>54</sup> Keller mentioned more in her private letter to her friend Jo Davidson: “Poly and I went to Hiroshima with Takeo Iwahashi to give our usual appeal meeting, but no sooner had we arrived than the bitter irony of it all gripped us overpoweringly, and it cost us a supreme effort to speak.”<sup>55</sup> Keller was further shocked to learn of the misery of Hiroshima citizens when a welfare officer walked to Keller, and let her touch his face bearing the terrible scars and burns caused by A-bomb. She wrote that, “Polly saw burns on the face of the welfare officer—a shocking sight. He let me touch his face, and the rest is silence—the people struggle on and say nothing about their lifelong hurts.”<sup>56</sup>

Polly tried to convey to Keller the sadness and horror in the eyes of the people they passed. Keller was told through Polly's eyes that only the children smiled slightly. Keller wrote to the *Mainichi shinbun*:

The height of the war tragedy gripped me in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was an indescribable shock to me to find the ruin and misery in these cities which eleven years ago in their flourishing power and beauty had held out to me such joyous hospitality. Stunned, I witnessed how completely Hiroshima had been laid in ashes by the atomic explosion. There were no tall buildings left, and all structures looked temporary, as if erected in haste. Many persons we passed had faces bearing the marks of atomic burns and an expression of horror in their eyes.<sup>57</sup>



Figure 3. Helen Keller visits Hiroshima in 1948. Courtesy of the American Foundation for the Blind.

53 Keller Hiroshima Speech 1948.

54 Hamai 1948.

55 Keller to Jo Davidson, 20 December 1948.

56 Keller to Jo Davidson 1948.

57 Keller to *Mainichi shinbun* 1948.

Keller publicly praised American democracy as the solution to Japan's problems, but privately she lamented the A-bombs. She was convinced that the American role in the war was wrong. Keller's tour was further extended to the city of Nagasaki, where the second A-bomb was dropped three days after Hiroshima, killing 70,000 people instantly. Her visits to Hiroshima and Nagasaki challenged her belief in the role of the U.S. in the world, but Keller remained silent. Polly and Keller "stumbled over ground cluttered in every direction like foundation-stones, timbers, broken pipe-lines, bits of machinery and twisted girders. I felt sure that I smelt the dust from the burning of Nagasaki—the smoke, of death."<sup>58</sup> Keller met Nagai Takashi 永井隆, a physician, and a survivor of the A-bomb who was dying now of radiation sickness. Nagai was the author of *Nagasaki no kane* 長崎の鐘 (The Bell of Nagasaki, 1946), in which he reflected on his imminent death, on the fate of his young children and the meaning of the devastation. The Keller party visited him on his deathbed in a small iron hut near the epicenter of the explosion. Keller wrote, "Polly saw him dying with her own eyes, and was almost unable to speak or spell. . . . He is not supposed to live after Christmas." Keller wrote in her letter to Jo Davidson, "This is murder indeed—taking not only the physical life of a young man, but also the potential work wrapped up in him that would have thrown its light far into the future."<sup>59</sup>

The emotional impact of her visit of Hiroshima and Nagasaki made Keller into one of the most prominent opponents of nuclear warfare, and a promoter of U.S.-Japan friendship. When Norman Cousins, editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, started a "moral adoption" program that allowed individual Americans to become financial supporters of Hiroshima orphans in 1949, Helen Keller became a major contributor.<sup>60</sup> The program provided \$70,000 to seven orphanages and aided 600 child victims of the A-bomb in Hiroshima. The program earned the U.S. considerable good will and advertised American benevolence and a spirit of humanitarianism. Keller and Hiroshima mayor Hamai continued their exchange of letters until Hamai's resignation in 1967. Hamai periodically sent Keller reports on the progress of Hiroshima city's reconstruction, and a copy of the translation of the declaration of peace on the occasion of the seventh anniversary of the A-bomb.

## Conclusion

One year after he had organized the Helen Keller campaign in Japan, Iwahashi was invited by Keller to tour the U.S. for a month. The tour was financed by the American Foundation for the Blind, the Rockefeller Foundation and Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Philadelphia. Iwahashi attended numerous conferences on the blind, and visited American schools for the blind to grasp the American methods of rehabilitating the blind. At Keller's instigation, Iwahashi also attended a dinner party at the Harvard Club to which the Nobel Prize winner, Japanese physicist Yukawa Hideki 湯川秀樹 among others had been invited. The American Foundation for the Blind provided Iwahashi with a considerable number of English braille books, and audio devices (including audio books) to increase the self-help of the sightless. Keller wrote to MacArthur about the custom duty payable on those items upon Iwahashi's return to Japan. He promptly replied, promising him immunity. He then

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58 Keller to Jo Davidson 1948.

59 Keller to Jo Davidson 1948.

60 Cousins 1949.

contacted the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. to ship more books and other technical materials to help the blind in Japan. Thus, shortly after this trip, Iwahashi and his Osaka Lighthouse staff were able to work on the publication of a Japanese-English dictionary on braille.<sup>61</sup>

During the Occupation, the U.S. remained concerned about anti-American sentiment and the possibility of a left-wing uprising in Japan as they committed to using Japan as a bulwark against Communist expansion in Asia. To accomplish this, MacArthur and SCAP relied not only on economic and military policies, but also on civil diplomacy and such social welfare programs as those for the blind in order to promote a pro-American attitude among the Japanese. MacArthur's wife, Jean, also contributed to Helen Keller's campaign by visiting Japan Lighthouse, and showing great interest in the Lighthouse's vocational training programs and library facilities. Cultural programs had little immediate impact on U.S.-Japan relations, perhaps, but they had significant effect in the longer term. There is no doubt that MacArthur's support for Keller's nationwide campaign in Japan served to underscore America's friendship with Japan, and highlighted its generosity to handicapped and sightless people and even A-bomb victims in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The U.S. government was keenly aware of the international impact of Keller. In 1937 when the second Sino-Japanese war broke out, the U.S. had cautious relations with the Japanese government. In his private report to the Secretary of State on her visit, U.S. ambassador to Japan, Joseph Grew praised Keller as "a woman of no official standing, appeal to the Japanese nation had been amply evidenced by the warm reception, largely official, which has been given her."<sup>62</sup> Keller cultivated a deep affection for Iwahashi and his family members, and they became great friends and supporters of each other. Keller lamented having to cancel the remainder of her trip to China, where hundreds of blind people awaited her visit. Yet, her experience in Japan of 1937 created a chance for Keller to shift her focus from a narrow U.S. orientation to a more global project. In addition to her social welfare program for the blind, Keller's second trip to Japan in 1948 proved that she could be a major political asset for the U.S. The State Department noted Keller's international impact immediately, and the U.S. ambassador to the Philippines, which had just gained its independence from the U.S., invited her to visit the Philippines. The ambassador realized that the U.S. could have no better bearer of good will than Helen Keller. He judged that Keller's visit would be vital to the improvement of relations between Americans and Filipinos.<sup>63</sup> Helen Keller's trips to Japan were testament to her effectiveness as a civil ambassador of U.S. democratic ideals.

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63 Nilesen 2004, p. 97.

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