

Nichibunken and Me: From “Nihonjinron” to Visions of the World Through a Japanese Prism

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My connection to the International Research Center for Japanese Studies dates to the summer of 2011, when I had the honor of joining Professor Tobe Ryōichi’s research group on *Leadership in Modern Japan*. Following a year of residence at Nichibunken, the group continued for two years and, in 2014, published *Kindai Nihon no rīdāshippu: kiro ni tatsu shidōshatachi*.¹ My own research focused on interwar prime minister, Hamaguchi Osachi.²

Although my direct ties with Nichibunken are relatively new, I share a longer personal history with the institution: we are both a product of the 1980s. Just ten months before the center was founded in Kyoto in May 1987, I began my graduate studies in Japanese history and politics at Kyoto University.

The Exciting 1980s

The 1980s was an exciting time for Japan, and for US-Japan relations, which was the subject of my MA thesis at Kyoto University.³ High economic growth was in its third decade. And the close rapport between Japanese Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro and American President Ronald Reagan (the so-called “Ron-Yasu relationship”) hinted to a new international stature for postwar Japan. Throughout the 1980s, the robust Japanese economy attracted significant international attention. And within Japan, it was a time of great confidence, an era when the reproachful scholarship of the Japanese Left, which had defined the academic mainstream through the 1970s, yielded to a more positive vision of modern Japan promoted by increasingly self-assured Japanese conservatives.

It was at this time that the Nakasone administration proposed an academic foundation for Japan’s new economic, political, and geopolitical prowess. According to a 1990 Nichibunken committee report, “We must thoroughly investigate Japanese culture and publicize Japan’s superior characteristics abroad.”⁴ The promotion of Japan’s unique strengths was clearly reflected in the team research projects sponsored by Nichibunken in its first years, including investigations of the “Basic Structure of Japanese Culture,” the “Japanese View of Nature,” and

¹ Tobe, Ryōichi, ed., *Kindai Nihon no rīdāshippu: kiro ni tatsu shidōshatachi* (Tokyo: Chikura Shobō, 2014).

² Frederick Dickinson, “Senkanki no sekai ni okeru seiji shidō no kadai: Hamaguchi Osachi o chūshin ni,” in Tobe, ed., *Kindai Nihon no rīdāshippu*.

³ Frederick Dickinson, “Nichi-Bei anpo taisei no hen’yō: MSA kyōtei ni okeru saigunbi ni kansuru ryōkai” (Transformation of the U.S.-Japan Security Relationship: The 1954 Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement and Japanese Rearmament), I, II. *Hōgaku ronsō* vol. 121 no. 4 (7/1987), pp. 60–82; vol. 122 no. 3 (12/1987), pp. 103–131.

⁴ Committee, “The Founding of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies” (1990). Quoted in Inoki Takenori, et al., eds., *Shin-nihongaku tanjō: Kokusai nihon bunka kenkyū sentā no 25nen* (Tokyo: Kadokawa gakugei, 2012), p. 26.

“Japanese Imagination.” These themes resonated well with increasingly frequent discussions in the popular media of distinct (and, presumably, superior) features of Japanese culture and society, discussions known as *Nihonjinron*.⁵

At the same time, across the Pacific, two important scholarly trends continued to inspire studies of Japanese history and culture. The first was an outgrowth of the enormous new scale of American global involvement since the Second World War. “Area Studies” was a systematic effort by the US government to encourage the study of non-Western societies. Begun with the establishment of the Foreign Area Fellowship Program (FAFP) in 1950, the initiative funneled millions of dollars to American universities for the focused study of language, culture, and history.⁶

My own first scholarly engagement of Japan followed this model. As a sophomore at the University of Notre Dame in 1980, I participated in a year-long exchange program at Sophia University in Tokyo, where every class focused on Japan: language, culture, history, politics, etc. Without much comparative context, the ultimate effect was similar to the vision of Japanese uniqueness accentuated by the *Nihonjinron* sweeping Japan at the time.

A separate but complimentary influence on my formation as a scholar of Japan was a trend that gripped American social sciences in the 1950s. As applied by Japan specialists in the 1960s, “modernization theory” shared the basic goal of Nichibunken’s later promotion of “superior” Japanese characteristics: to replace the dark tale championed by the Japanese Left with a more positive vision of modern Japan.⁷ Although my 1986 master’s thesis at Kyoto University did not consciously engage “progressive” Japanese scholarship, by defining the Mutual Defense Assistant Agreement of 1954 as a step forward in U.S.-Japan relations, it echoed both the upbeat tone of American modernization scholarship and the rising authority of conservative Japanese visions of modern Japan.

Changing Visions of Japan in the 1990s

The 1990s brought dramatic changes to both Japan and scholarly examinations of the country. The bursting of the Japanese economic bubble immediately soured the rosy picture promoted by Japanese conservatives in the 1980s and eroded any remnants of modernization scholarship in the U.S. At the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, the strong initial focus on the humanities yielded to a more critical social science approach. Team projects that had initially exalted specific aspects of Japanese culture now turned to more scientific examinations of Japanese society, including coverage of “Women in Japan,” “Law and Society in Transition,” and “General Interest Magazines in Taishō.”

In the U.S., after over a decade of popular press criticism of Japanese economic strength

⁵ See Peter N. Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1986).

⁶ See Masao Miyoshi and Harry D. Harootunian, *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁷ See John W. Dower, “Introduction,” in John W. Dower, ed., *Origins of the Modern Japanese State: Selected Writings of E. H. Norman* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975).

(the so-called “Japan bashing” literature),⁸ scholarly analysis took a significantly critical turn, questioning key assumptions of modernization scholarship. According to Sheldon Garon, it was time to view “modernization” less as a tale of inevitable “progress” than as change with a wide range of possible political and economic outcomes.⁹ Among the most high-profile champions of this sober vision were Harvard University professor Andrew Gordon and Princeton professor, Garon, himself.

Gordon’s 1991 *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Imperial Japan* recognized a significant labor movement in modern Japan. But, for Gordon, the weight of emperor and empire represented serious “contradictions” that checked the advent of true democracy in the early twentieth century.¹⁰ Likewise, according to Sheldon Garon, close ties between civilian reformers and reform bureaucrats ensured a relatively seamless shift from liberal democratic to fascist Japan in the 1930s.¹¹

My own first major publication, the product of a 1993 PhD Yale dissertation, also appeared in the 1990s and reflected the growing uncertainties of the era. *War and National Reinvention* did not stress either “contradictions” or implacable civil-bureaucratic ties. But by highlighting the turbulence of Japanese politics during the First World War, it departed significantly from the relatively upbeat vision of US-Japan relations of my master’s thesis.¹²

Twenty-First Century Japan

The prolonged era of distress following the bursting of the Japanese economic bubble naturally produced another significant change in scholarship on Japan. One might describe the early twenty-first century as a shift from pessimism to diversity in studies of modern Japan. At the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, team research projects increasingly assumed an explicitly regional and comparative dimension, focusing on issues such as “Maritime Asia,” “Family and Gender in Asia,” and “History of Academic Concepts in China and Japan.”

Prolonged Japanese economic distress notwithstanding, the twenty-first century is increasingly heralded for its dramatic new level of global integration. And American historians have scrambled to expand the parameters of their analyses accordingly. Mirroring these general trends, historians of modern Japan increasingly aim for what they describe as a “transnational” vision of modern Japan.¹³

Among the best of this scholarship are studies that depart significantly from the familiar

⁸ See Bill Emmott, *Japanophobia: The Myth of the Invincible Japanese* (NY: Times Books, 1993).

⁹ Sheldon Garon, “Rethinking Modernization and Modernity in Japanese History: A Focus on State-Society Relations,” *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 53, no. 2 (May 1994), pp. 346–366.

¹⁰ Andrew Gordon, *Labor and Imperial Democracy in Prewar Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

¹¹ Sheldon Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds: The State in Everyday Life* (Princeton University Press, 1997).

¹² Frederick R. Dickinson, *War and National Reinvention: Japan in the Great War, 1914–1919* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999).

¹³ For an articulation of what constitutes “transnational” scholarship, see Sheldon Garon, “Transnational History and Japan’s ‘Comparative Advantage,’” *The Journal of Japanese Studies*, Volume 43, Number 1, Winter 2017, pp. 65–92.

tale of a Japanese “response” to Western convention to highlight ways that Japan actually helped shape the modern world. Miriam Kingsberg, for example, argues that Japan took the lead in defining drug control as a vital responsibility for civilized states in the early twentieth century.¹⁴ Mark Metzler sees Japan as a pioneer in sustained double-digit economic growth after 1945 and as an indispensable node in the growth of an international banking system from the latter nineteenth-century.¹⁵ Ran Zwigenberg gives Japanese commemorations of the bombing of Hiroshima prominence of place in the rise of a global memory culture after 1945.¹⁶

Evolving Study of World War I

My own scholarship continues to mirror both these general developments and related trends in my specific field of the history of World War I. Serious study of the First World War began with the publication of diplomatic archives from multiple belligerents soon after 1918.

Understandably, the principal aim of this scholarship was to locate culpability for the calamity.¹⁷ But after 1945, World War I scholars had a powerful new incentive to examine the 1914–1918 years: to locate the cause of the even larger upheaval that was the Second World War.¹⁸

In suggesting that the politics of the First World War in Japan operated again in Tokyo in the 1930s, my own 1999 investigation of Japan and World War I strongly echoed this immediate post-1945 scholarship on World War I.¹⁹ But as early as the 1970s, historians of Europe began turning away from the simple story of the twentieth as a century of war to recognize World War I as the departure point for new models of political organization and economic integration that guaranteed long-term stability after 1945.²⁰ According to Zara Steiner, “the 1920s must be seen within the context of the aftermath of the Great War and not

¹⁴ Miriam Kingsberg, *Moral Nation: Modern Japan and Narcotics in Global History* (University of California Press, 2014).

¹⁵ See Mark Metzler, *Capital as Will and Imagination: Schumpeter's Guide to the Postwar Japanese Miracle* (Cornell University Press, 2013) and Simon James Bytheway and Mark Metzler, *Central Banks and Gold: How Tokyo, London, and New York Shaped the Modern World* (Cornell University Press, 2016), respectively.

¹⁶ Ran Zwigenberg, *Hiroshima and the Rise of Global Memory Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

¹⁷ For a convenient overview of this literature, see P. M. H. Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe* (NY: Longman, 1986), Chp. 1.

¹⁸ Well representative of this scholarship was the 1961 study by Fritz Fischer, which suggested that German territorial aims in 1939 closely mirrored those in 1914. Fritz Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht* (Dusseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1961). Published in English as *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (NY: W. W. Norton, 1967).

¹⁹ Dickinson, *War and National Reinvention*, Conclusion.

²⁰ See, for example, Charles S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe: Stabilization in France, Germany, and Italy in the Decade after World War I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), Walter A. McDougall, *France's Rhineland diplomacy, 1914–1924: The Last Bid for a Balance of Power in Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978) and Marc Trachtenberg, *Reparation in World Politics: France and European Economic Diplomacy, 1916–1923* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1980). For a convenient overview of this literature, see Jacobson, “Is There a New International History of the 1920s,” *American Historical Review* 88, no. 3 (June 1983), pp. 617–645.

as the prologue to the 1930s and the outbreak of a new European conflict.”²¹

Trends in the study of World War I offer a useful vantage point from which to envision a constructive future for the study of modern Japan. The centennial commemoration of the war inspired a wave of new Japanese-language scholarship on Japan in World War I. But much of the new work adheres to the familiar formula of the First World War as prelude to the Second. Naraoka Sochi describes the Twenty-one Demands thrust upon Beijing by the Ōkuma cabinet in 1915 as a prologue to Japan’s subsequent conquest of China.²² Yamamuro Shin’ichi accentuates the First World War as the foundation for Japanese total war planning in World War II.²³ In so doing, these authors strongly echo Fritz Fischer’s classic study of World War I era Germany, which set the stage for a generation of scholarship highlighting a so-called German “Sonderweg” (special path).²⁴

Toward a Global Perspective of Japan and the First World War

As earlier noted, the idea of a distinct Japanese path enjoyed its heyday in the 1980s (albeit in a more positive sense) and was a reasonable reflection of new confidence in a robust Japanese economy and augmented Japanese international stature. In a global era, however, there is little use for such a *Nihonjinron*-style vision of modern Japan. Like the most astute World War I scholarship since the 1970s and the more recent “transnational” analyses of Japan, the study of Japan and the First World War can benefit from a conceptual retooling that significantly expands both the chronological and geographic scope of analysis.

My own recent work on Japan and the First World War asks not what Japanese belligerence tells us about a distinct Japanese path to war in the 1930s. Rather, it highlights the 1914–1919 years as the foundation for a critical Japanese contribution to the history of the twentieth century. One could, of course, identify many ways in which Japan impacted the world before 1914. But the First World War brought two conspicuous changes to Japan that dramatically expanded its global footprint. Between 1914 and 1918, Japan became both an industrial state and world power.

In the latter nineteenth century, Japan had, of course, already attracted global attention for becoming the first Asian state to modernize. And in 1905, Japan’s surprising military victory over Russia catapulted it to the position of strongest regional power in Asia. But between 1914 and 1919, Japanese exports expanded almost fourfold.²⁵ And by 1920/1924, manufactured goods accounted for more than 90 percent of those exports.²⁶ At the 1919 Paris Peace

²¹ Zara Steiner, *The Lights That Failed: European International History, 1919–1933* (Oxford, 2005), p. 602.

²² Naraoka, Sōchi, *Tai-nijū ikkajō yōkyū to wa nan datta no ka: dai-ichiji sekai taisen to Nitchū tairitsu no genten* (Nagoya: Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, 2015).

²³ Yamamuro, Shin’ichi, *Fukugō sensō to sōryokusen no danzō: Nihon ni totte no dai’ichiji sekai taisen* (Kyōto: Jinbun Shoin, 2011).

²⁴ Fischer, *Griff nach der Weltmacht*.

²⁵ Ōkawa, Kazushi and Miyohai Shinohara, eds., *Patterns of Japanese Economic Development: A Quantitative Appraisal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 334.

²⁶ W. G. Beasley, *Japanese Imperialism, 1894–1945* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 126, table 2.

Conference, Japanese delegates participated, for the first time, in an international conference as equals of delegates from the four other most powerful states on earth—the US, Britain, France, and Italy.

Narrowly focused on the subsequent history of continental expansion, orthodox histories accentuate the challenges, rather than opportunities, posed by the peace conference for Japan.²⁷ But viewed from the perspective of contemporaries, Japan's presence at Paris was an extraordinary reflection of Japan's pivotal role in the allied victory. By November 1914, the Japanese Navy and Army had conquered German Micronesia (South Pacific) and the German fortress at Qingdao (China), marking the end of German power in Asia.²⁸ Between 1914 and 1918, Japan's Third Fleet escorted British imperial troops from Australia and New Zealand to the Arabian Sea. From February 1917, three Japanese destroyer divisions and one cruiser joined the battle against German submarines in the Mediterranean. Several Japanese Red Cross nursing corps were active in Europe during the war.²⁹ Between 1914 and 1918, 200,000 tons of Japanese cargo ships traveled between Japan and Europe. Japan supplied the allies with copper and currency, including over 366 million dollars in loans. Japan transferred three Japanese cruisers and 600,000 rifles to Russia and built twelve destroyers for France.

This extraordinary activity became the foundation for a remarkable new Japanese presence on the international stage. Japanese support for the new international infrastructure for peace after World War I was as important to its success as aid from Tokyo to the allies between 1914 and 1919.³⁰ America's failure to ratify the Versailles Treaty or to join the League of Nations threatened to destroy the new infrastructure for peace from the start. But Japanese ratification in October 1919 launched the peace treaty into effect. And Japan's membership in the League of Nations ensured its vitality, at least until Japan's withdrawal in 1933. Japan was not only a founding member of the League. It was one of four permanent members of the executive body, the League Council, and the fourth largest financial contributor.³¹

By 1918, Japan possessed the third most powerful navy in the world, and its agreement to participate in the Washington (1921-1922), Geneva (1927), and London (1930) naval conferences ensured the viability of a robust new international disarmament regime after the First World

²⁷ Historians emphasize the relative silence of Japanese delegates at Paris, Woodrow Wilson's fight with Tokyo over Japan's new possession of Shandong Province, China, and the rejection of Japan's proposal for a "racial equality" clause in the covenant of the new League of Nations. See Thomas W. Burkman, "'Sairento pātonā' hatsugen su," *Kokusai seiji*, 56 (1976), pp. 102–116; Russell H. Fifield, *Woodrow Wilson and the Far East: The Diplomacy of the Shantung Question* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1965); Naoko Shimazu, *Japan, Race and Equality: The Racial Equality Proposal of 1919* (London: Routledge, 1998), respectively.

²⁸ For a brief overview of Japan's contribution to the Allied cause during World War I, see Frederick R. Dickinson, "More than a 'Moment': Woodrow Wilson and the Foundations of Twentieth-Century Japan," *Japanese Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 19 (2018), pp. 590-591.

²⁹ Eiko Araki, *Naichingēru no matsueitachi: 'kango' kara yominaosu daiichiji sekai raisen* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2014).

³⁰ For a full articulation of this argument, see Frederick R. Dickinson, *World War I and the Triumph of a New Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

³¹ Thomas W. Burkman, *Japan, the League of Nations: Empire and World Order, 1914–1938* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), p. 141.

War. The Five-Power Treaty at Washington collectively eliminated 66 ships from the American, British, and Japanese arsenals, including plans for ten new capital ships for the Imperial Japanese Navy.³² France and Italy refused to sign the London Naval Treaty. But American, British, and Japanese agreement in 1930 extended limits to submarines, heavy cruisers, light cruisers and destroyers.

With the September 1931 Manchurian Incident, Japan embarked upon an aggressive trajectory that would ultimately plunge the Asia/Pacific region into fifteen years of war and destruction. But it is worth remembering that Japan was the only victor of the First World War that pursued imperial retraction after 1918. Like Britain and France, the Japanese empire initially expanded through acquisition of territory from Imperial Germany; Japan remained in German Micronesia in the South Pacific and Shandong Province, China. Unlike the British or French empires, however, Japanese troops actually withdrew from Shandong by 1922, thereby giving concrete substance to Woodrow Wilson's new ideal of "self-determination." Japan's signature on the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact condemning war, moreover, was viewed by contemporaries as another critical pillar of interwar peace.³³ This interwar infrastructure for peace would ultimately lay the foundations for the impressive new level of global integration of the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Scholarship on Japan has change dramatically over the last forty years. In the 1980s, both Nichibunken and I began intellectual explorations that, reflecting the new economic power and geopolitical status of Japan, highlighted Japanese uniqueness and power. The bursting of the economic bubble in the 1990s, prolonged Japanese economic distress, and rapid global integration of the twenty-first century, however, has made such a vision obsolete. Nichibunken's team projects have clearly responded to these changes. Team projects in the 1980s championing Japanese uniqueness (*Nihonjinron*) yielded to more social science analyses in the 1990s and to more regional and comparative examinations in the twenty-first century.

Historians of Japan, however, have much more work to do to fashion a vision of Japan appropriate for the twenty-first century. Compared to the boom days of the 1980s, the relevance of Japan and Japanese history is no longer evident, especially outside of Asia. What is the utility of Japanese history in a twenty-first century world? It is no longer enough to simply champion the beauty and complexity of Japanese cultural capital: sushi, ukiyoe, anime, etc.

A look at Japan in the First World War offers a glimpse of a possible new future for the study of modern Japan. Orthodox treatments of Japan during the war serve simply to confirm a standard Eurocentric vision of modern world history. That history sees Britain, France, and the United States as more than just pillars of a specific Western European cultural tradition.

³² David C. Evans and Mark R. Peattie, *Kaigun: Strategy, Tactics, and Technology in the Imperial Japanese Navy, 1887–1941* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), p. 197.

³³ See Oona A. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro, *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2017) for a recent positive reassessment of this otherwise controversial pact.

They are considered actual models of modern civilization. Standard analyses of both the First and Second World Wars aim to accentuate the heroic activities of these three states to fashion a modern, Western, liberal international world.

The history of Japan in the First World War, however, raises serious questions about this familiar tale of the “Rise of the West.” Mainstream analyses relegate Japan to the margins between 1914 and 1919 and explain the road to ruin between 1931 and 1945 as a consequence of that marginal status. But the record shows that Japan played a key role not only in the allied victory in 1918 but also in building in the 1920s what would ultimately become a critical foundation for the global integration of the twenty-first century.

In the twenty-first century, the most important aim of scholarship on modern Japan, in other words, is to clarify ways in which Japan has participated in and shaped the emergence of a modern global (not Western) world. Only by directly challenging prevailing Eurocentric visions of history can we build a constructive intellectual foundation for our global world.