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A Historian's Formative Years

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My “formative years” as a historian go back to the 1950s when I studied British history in college and then U.S. and East Asian history as a graduate student. Actually, however, it may be more correct to say that my interest in history goes back to the 1940s when the Second World War was fought and ended. Japan, where I was living, was defeated and occupied by U.S. forces. Like virtually all grade school pupils in Japan at that time, during the 1930s and beyond, history essentially consisted of what the government told us it was. When I was born in 1934, Japan was already at war with China, having invaded Manchuria and sought to expand its control over other regions of the country. At the time of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, I was in first grade, and four years later when the war ended, in fifth grade.

One of the first reforms undertaken during the U.S. occupation was to have history textbooks completely rewritten. I still remember the day when our classroom teacher told us to bring a brush and ink so as to erase sections that were considered unacceptable to the occupation authorities. Those passages included references to “divine” origins of the country and the myth that the nation had never lost a war. Virtually overnight the ‘history’ that we had studied was overturned, and textbooks in history, geography, and other subjects were rewritten. This was quite a remarkable experience even to grade school pupils. What we had studied and absorbed was now almost entirely discredited and revised, and we read new textbooks that had been hastily rewritten and published. This is still a shocking memory to many Japanese of my generation. It seemed to us that what our teachers (as well as our parents and other elders) taught us yesterday was no longer true today, and that textbooks could be rewritten when political circumstances changed. (My wife, born in Paris of Japanese parents, remembers that when she and her family returned to Japan via the United States after the war, she, too, had to black out textbook passages although her Japanese was still inadequate and she hardly understood why her teacher was telling her to do so.)

In retrospect, that experience may have had a great deal to do with my decision to become a historian. While in grade and middle schools I had vaguely thought that I would someday work for a company, like so many of my friends did, following the footsteps of my father. I would go to university and, upon graduation, look for a job. During my senior year in high school, however, all this changed virtually overnight when the Grew Foundation gave me a scholarship to study in the United States for four years at a college. The foundation had just been established by, and in honor of, Joseph C. Grew, the American diplomat who served in Japan as ambassador during 1932-1941. When Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor led to war across the Pacific, Grew was expatriated and served as undersecretary of state for most of the war years. His principal task was to prepare for the occupation of Germany, Japan, and their allies upon their ultimate defeat. He was particularly interested in the postwar occupation of Japan as he had spent so much time there and come to know a large number of Japanese who, he believed, had been friendly toward the American people. He thought it would be possible for the two countries to restore their friendship and make it the lynchpin of a peaceful Pacific after the war. He expressed such hopes in a wartime memoir, *Ten Years in Japan*, donating the royalty income from the sale of the book to establish a foundation that would invite young Japanese to come and study in the United States. My father read about the foundation in a newspaper and encouraged me to apply for a Grew Foundation scholarship. I did, as did hundreds of high school seniors. Most

fortunately, I was one of the first four students to be selected as Grew scholars. Ambassador Grew's idea, eagerly endorsed by the Foundation, was to send us to liberal arts colleges, not to large universities, and the Foundation applied on behalf of each of us to several colleges in the United States. In my case, they applied to Haverford College, a small institution outside Philadelphia that had been founded by Quakers in the 1830s. Very fortunately, the college admitted me, and I started my American life there in September 1953.

Haverford had only two faculty members in the History Department, an Americanist and a Europeanist. It so happened that when I started there, a new Europeanist was arriving as an associate (tenured) professor. His name was Wallace T. MacCaffrey. My encounter with him changed my life. Not only was he a great scholar and teacher, but he was an extremely kind, thoughtful man. I enrolled in his introductory course in European history and almost immediately fell under his spell. My high school-learned history was totally demolished in the first couple of weeks, and I learned everything, from the Roman Empire to the First World War, from scratch. But it was a most pleasant experience, and I knew right away that I wanted to continue to study with him. Given my inadequate English, the grades I initially got from him ranged from a C plus to a B minus, but he was very encouraging, and my grades steadily improved. By the junior year he was supportive of my aspiration to continue the study of history at a graduate school.

So I went to Harvard, intending to continue the study of British history. But instead I was persuaded by the faculty there to switch to U.S. history and to East Asian history. The History Department had just established a doctoral program in what it called "American-Far Eastern Relations," in which students would study both U.S. history and East Asian history. The faculty supervising this new program included Oscar Handlin in U.S. history and John K. Fairbank in Chinese history. The subject had been written about mostly by political scientists who had developed various approaches to, and theories of, international relations, but my hope, and that of my mentors, was to examine it as a historian, using primary material written in the languages of the region.

Most fortunately, Harvard's History Department had hired a young historian of U.S. foreign relations, Ernest R. May, who was teaching a two-semester sequence tracing the subject from the Spanish-American War (1898) to the origins of the Cold War. I went to his first lecture and was deeply impressed. He was not only an eloquent speaker but seemed to lecture without notes. He would hold a chalk and walk back and forth in front of the blackboard jotting down names and dates from time to time, but otherwise he mesmerized students by speaking fast and eloquently about his subjects. He did not just deal with the United States but always brought in other countries about which he seemed to know a great deal. I took the two-semester sequence and followed all the factual details he was imparting to us. I wanted to study with him beyond the first year, and, most fortunately, he was given tenure in 1959, the year when I was to start working on my dissertation. So I asked him to chair my dissertation committee, and he graciously agreed to do so.

Both Fairbank and May suggested that my doctoral thesis might deal with U.S.-East Asian affairs around the time of the Manchurian crisis of 1931, when Japan used force to bring the Three Eastern Provinces, as the region was then called, under its control. Most published studies of the affair had made use of English material, both published and unpublished, but few, if any, had utilized non-English sources. My advisors believed that I would be able to make a contribution if I did research in other languages as well. I was able to read Chinese and Japanese, but not Korean, Vietnamese, and other Asian languages, and I still cannot access primary material written in them. But the dissertation was well received by the committee, and I was encouraged to try to publish it as a book. It took me four additional years (1961-1965) to do so, primarily because I wanted to study Russian first. Soviet diplomatic documents had just been published, and there was no excuse for not making use of them. So I studied Russian after completing my dissertation and was able to use printed USSR documents for my first book.

Entitled *After Imperialism: The Search for a New Order in the Far East, 1921-1931*, it was published in 1965.¹ It was probably the first multi-archival study of the changes that took place in international affairs in the Asia-Pacific region in the

¹ Akira Iriye, *After Imperialism: The Search for a New Order in the Far East, 1921-1931*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965).

wake of the Great War. The decade of the 1920s had been characterized by both ‘internationalism’ exemplified by the newly founded League of Nations, on one hand, and the ‘isolationism’ of the principal postwar power, the United States, on the other. Such conditions of uncertainty were followed by Japan’s aggression in China, starting with the Manchurian incident of 1931, against which the League of Nations proved incapable of responding in order to restore the status quo. How the countries in the Asia-Pacific region dealt with the challenges of the 1920s, and why they failed to maintain a stable regional order, were the questions I sought to examine. Fortunately, official archives of the countries involved were beginning to be made available for research, which I undertook in Washington, Tokyo, Taipei, and elsewhere. (It was impossible to go to China, but most of the official Chinese archives through the year 1927 had been shipped to Taiwan, where I was able to conduct research.) At that time copying machines were not available, or else too expensive to use, but, fortunately, my newlywed wife was able to come to Taipei with me, and she copied many Chinese documents for me by using a pencil.

At that time, such work fitted into the field known as ‘diplomatic history.’ This was a field with a long and venerable tradition, going back to the nineteenth century. It may even be said that multi-archival studies of diplomatic relations were among the first areas of research in which history monographs had been published. The pioneering scholars in the field, such as William Langer and Samuel Flagg Bemis, had conducted research in published and archival records of foreign ministries and written a number of influential studies.² There really was very little to be added to what they had written so long as formal (“diplomatic”) relations among nations were concerned. But when the younger generation, of Ernest May’s age, emerged during the 1950s to publish U.S. diplomatic history, they preferred the term, ‘American foreign relations,’ probably because they thought this latter would better describe what they were trying to do.³ Instead of just focusing on official diplomatic affairs, they were interested in situating them in the context of broader national histories, linking foreign affairs to domestic political and social developments. A good illustration of this broadening was the establishment, in the 1960s, of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations (or SHAFR). Somehow ‘foreign relations’ sounded more appropriate than ‘diplomacy’ to describe what these historians were trying to accomplish. The new term would be more comprehensive than the old and would include not just formal diplomacy but also ‘informal’ interactions among countries, including economic interchanges, social interactions, and cultural exchanges. Historians of U.S. foreign affairs began to publish a large number of monographs that examined how Americans of various backgrounds and interests had interacted with other countries. They were important additions to the literature. SHAFR members honored me by electing me president of the organization for the year 1978.

At the same time, however, there was a tendency to be ‘uni-archival,’ that is, dealing with U.S. foreign relations primarily, if not exclusively, on the basis of American material. The subject became virtually a part of national history, with little reference to other countries and their histories. But, after all, to treat “foreign affairs” as a domestic subject is to forget that no nation is entirely autonomous, that no people are completely unique. Nations and peoples are encountering and interacting with one another, directly or ‘virtually,’ at all times, and we need a conceptual framework that accommodates such phenomena. One solution offered by historians in the last decades of the twentieth century was to conceptualize something they called ‘international history.’ In the twenty-first century the term ‘global history’ has become equally popular. This reflects the awareness that the nation is only one of many identities an individual possesses, and that people in different countries interact with one another through many such identities.

Among such identities would be race, sexuality, and disability. People of various races, sexual orientation, and disabilities recognize one another not only within a country but also across national borders. Interrelationships among races have been a historical phenomenon going back many centuries, as have problems of accommodating people with physical or

² See, for example, William L. Langer, *European Alliances and Alignments* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1931), *The Diplomacy of Imperialism, 1890-1902*, 2 vols., (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1935), Langer and S. Everett Gleason, *The Challenge to Isolation, 1937-1940* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), Langer and Gleason, *The Undeclared War, 1940-1941* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953), and Samuel Flagg Bemis, *A Diplomatic History of the United States* 5th ed. (New York, Holt, 1955).

³ See, for example, Ernest R. May, *The World War and American Isolation 1914-17* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959).

intellectual difficulties. A national framework would be inadequate to understand their lives. Just as scholarship knows no national boundaries – there is no such thing as U.S. history that can only be understood by historians living in the country – all categories of humans exist everywhere and must be considered to be worldwide beings.

Such thinking has led to the emergence of ‘global history’ as an appropriate way of describing what a growing number of historians have begun to study. The term goes beyond ‘international relations history’ because it describes much more than what nations do to each other. At bottom is the thought that the human community should be considered a worldwide assembly of individuals. They may belong to separate nations, but they share the fundamental identity as humans, as against animals, plants, and other existences. Human beings may divide themselves into national communities, but they will retain their sense of identity as humans. For this reason, ‘human history’ or ‘global history’ would be a more appropriate framework in which to place studies of the past.

More than sixty years have passed since I first began to study history. During these years the discipline has become less and less nation-centered and more and more globally oriented, historians interacting across national boundaries. This is a phenomenon that I called “The Internationalization of History” in a speech I made in 1988 at the annual convention of the American Historical Association of which I had been honored to serve as president.⁴ The globalization of the study of history has continued unabated, and I cannot be happier about this development. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to pursue my study of history when both history and historiography have been moving in the direction of global interconnectedness and interchange.

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⁴ Akira Iriye, “The Internationalization of History,” *The American Historical Review* 94:1 (February 1989): 1-10.