Rediscovering America: Japanese Perspectives on the American Century

by Peter Duus and Kenji Hasegawa
Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011

—

Kristine Dennehy
California State University, Fullerton

Peter Duus and Kenji Hasegawa's edited volume *Rediscovering America: Japanese Perspectives on the American Century* is a delightfully engaging collection of fifty observations of life in the United States from the late nineteenth century to the last year of the Showa era (1926-1989). The editors provide a useful framework for understanding the commentaries by a wide range of Japanese writers who vacillate between overestimating and underestimating the behaviors and character of the American people over a 100-year period. As they note in the introduction, "the 'love-hate' dichotomy hardly does justice to the complexity of modern Japanese perspectives on the United States" (3), while the dynamic of overestimation and underestimation is helpful because it explicitly recognizes that Japanese students, intellectuals, journalists, and others all approached their object of study with preconceived notions of American culture before they made their own particular contributions to the discourse on American life. These commentators also often made explicit comparisons with life in Japan and presented these contrasts to their Japanese readership as a way to introduce, critique, and sometimes even praise American customs,

institutions, and lifestyles.

The book is divided into seven sections in chronological order, with each section covering roughly two decades. While some of the names are familiar to those with a basic knowledge of modern Japan, such as the prominent Christian Uchimura Kanzō, the radical activist Kōtoku Shūsui, the businessman Shibusawa Eiichi, the Nobel laureate Ōe Kenzaburō, and Sony's Morita Akio, one of the most significant features of this volume is that it includes a range of voices that have not generally been presented to English readers. For instance, in the first section entitled "Illusion and Disillusion," which covers the period from 1878-1906, we encounter the Buddhist philosopher Inoue Enryō through a section of his 1889 travel diary called "Religion in America." Inoue presents us with a number of themes that reoccur throughout the century covered in this collection, including his observations of a Darwinian social hierarchy, where non-Christians are thought of "as human beings of a lower order" (28).

Many of the writers comment on the competitive struggles that are central to life in America, where perseverance and hard work are often tied to Christian ideals. An anonymous contributor to the monthly journal *Chūō kōron* in 1921 juxtaposes Japanese notions of loyalty and self-sacrifice to those of Americans, who "work very hard, but since they are reluctant to make personal sacrifices, they follow their own interests" (77). The author extends his conventional dichotomies of national character to a discussion of Japanese immigrants in the United States by concluding that "Japan is a country that serves the idea of loyalty; the United States is a country that practices the reality of democracy. If Japanese immigrants overprize their ideal of loyalty, they are bound to find themselves in trouble" (80). As a way to contextualize such characterizations of national character, Duus and Hasegawa provide helpful introductions to each chapter where they elaborate on the larger historical milieu of the commentaries, such as in chapter three on "*Modan* America," where they note that in 1918 "the first professorial

chair in American studies was established at Tokyo Imperial University," a time when "… the political values associated with American democracy – individualism, equality, freedom, public debate, and fair play – still attracted intellectuals across a wide spectrum" (87). The selections throughout the volume provide interesting insights into how these often noted American characteristics of individualism and liberty are always enmeshed in a more complex social and political context. In particular, many of the writers comment on race relations as a way to question the ideals of American democracy and fair play.

For example, in chapter two, "Students and Immigrants," we are introduced to the father of sculptor Isamu Noguchi, the writer and poet Noguchi Yonejirō, who came to the United States in the mid-Meiji period (1868-1912) and encountered the shock of racism on Market Street in San Francisco. In 1911 he wrote of an early experience in California where he describes being "suddenly struck by a hard hand from behind, and found a large red-faced fellow, somewhat smiling in scorn, who, seeing my face, exclaimed, 'Hello, Jap [!]' I was terribly indignant to be addressed in such a fashion; my indignation increased when he ran away after spitting on my face" (59). Ethnic diversity and racial hierarchy are mentioned frequently as a salient feature of American life, as in conservative critic Etō Jun's piece "America as I See It," which ran in the daily newspaper *Asahi shinbun* in 1963 following a stint at Princeton University funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Etō's answer to the question, "What does it mean to 'become American'?" is as follows: "To put it succinctly it means using English in one's daily life… Driven to use English in their daily lives, foreigners find themselves on the road to becoming American before they realize it. And then they begin to notice that they are being placed in the American racial hierarchy that puts Anglo-Saxons at the top and blacks at the bottom" (261). A powerful account of the violence associated with American segregation and race relations is presented by famed journalist Honda Katsuichi in his "Traveling Through the Deep South," published in 1970. In explaining

the "lawlessness" of the South during the civil rights movement, he notes, "Since state policemen were all on the 'white side,' they were even more dangerous than ordinary white citizens" (293).

The aggression of America's past is also highlighted in discussions of the westward movement, particularly in one of the wartime excerpts, Sawada Ken's "On the History of American Imperialism" (1941). He explains, "Even before the original thirteen states were fully developed, Americans, driven by the pioneer spirit, opened up the Allegheny Mountains with hunting guns on their shoulders and axes on their belts… In the name of humanity they slaughtered the Indians they encountered… The strong conquered, and the weak were steadily pushed aside." (142) Although Frederick Jackson Turner is never mentioned by name by any of the writers, his frontier thesis permeates the pages in every decade. The most explicit introduction can be found in journalist Maida Minoru's "The Characteristics and Peculiarities of the Americans," from 1925. He states matter of factly, "It goes without saying, the frontier was the most powerful force molding the American spirit of hard work… They were scattered over the mountains, the plains, the rivers, and lakes of their vast territory, living in regions where wild animals roamed… pursuing their own goals unrestrained by others" (99). This kind of geographic determinism and recurring references to the vast landscape are central features in the Japanese imagination of the United States.

At the height of World War II, writer Sakanishi Shiho, who received a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1929, ties the life of American pioneers to the material blessings of the "wide frontier" in her 1944 essay "Why Do Americans Break the Law?" (168). The materialism and capitalist mindset of Americans are also central themes noted by many of the commentators, as in Ashida Hitoshi's "America on the Rise," which was published in *Chūō kōron* in 1925. A noted expert on international issues, he writes, "Materialism has established its tyranny there… and the breadth of America's territory and the wealth of its resources have made materialistic thinking the mainstream and enriched

those who conquered the land" (93). A humorous, biting critique of America's postwar affluence and conformity is found in progressive Oda Makoto's 1961 essay, "The Other Side of American Society." Here, the A&P supermarket symbolizes the uniformity and barrenness of American life, also encountered by Oda in the "PX-like store attached to the American Embassy" in Teheran where "that same familiar smell, that sanitary, harmless, useless smell, flowed into my nostrils" (247). While there are numerous references to the fast pace, vitality, and efficiency of American manufacturing and industry throughout the American century, the aforementioned pendulum of underestimation and overestimation is evident in the last chapter, entitled "America in Decline." This final section includes a glimpse into the life of Shimomura Mitsuko, the first woman correspondent to be sent abroad by *Asahi shinbun*. In New York, she describes the trials and tribulations of dealing with landlords, lawyers, and unapologetic customer service representatives. Frustration and anger resulting from these encounters strengthens her resolve to keep her "eyes open to find out why America, the land of efficiency, speed, and the pioneer spirit, has turned out the way it has" (317).

Sakanishi and Shimomura are two of the handful of underrepresented women in this collection. Nonetheless, issues regarding gender dynamics and the role of women in the United States are frequently mentioned. Meiji era "good wife, wise mother" type figures appear repeatedly in portrayals ranging from the ideal middle class homemaker in "Home Life in America" (1916) by Aoyama Tetsushirō, a student at Stanford University in the 1910s, to the "perfectly devoted spouse" (194) described by Christian social reformer Kagawa Toyohiko in 1945, to the paragons of housekeeping efficiency and political consciousness depicted by feminist Ishigaki Ayako in 1951. In contrast, after traveling through Mississippi, Honda Katsuichi counters this "usual image of the 'American housewife'" as follows: "…[H]ousewives in Negro society are much more likely to think of themselves as mothers than as wives. It is from the ranks of such women that the most powerful

supporters of the Negro movement continue to come." Putting this in the context of the history of slavery, he continues, "Their 'role as mother' extended as well into the families of their white 'masters,' where they took care of white children too" (298-299).

Interspersed throughout the text are a number of cartoons which add a rich visual element to the portrayals of "the Other," such as the 1955 depiction of a Japanese woman with her aloha shirt-clad American companion who towers over a pathetic looking Japanese veteran on crutches, reduced to begging for a living a decade after Japan's defeat. The lively prose and well captioned illustrations make this volume a fine choice for undergraduate classes in Japanese history, U.S.-Japan relations, as well as courses in American Studies and even modern world history. Many of the chosen authors make explicit comparisons between the United States and other Western countries such as England, France, and Germany, and flesh out the global context of events spanning from the Spanish-American War to the Vietnam War. This latter conflict is seen as the turning point in America's declining international influence, and is particularly problematic for the Japanese due to the bases on Okinawa serving as a crucial staging ground for the American military in Southeast Asia. China also surfaces in a variety of contexts, from the time of the Opium War, to geopolitical struggles over its "Open Door," to the twentieth century immigrant Yellow Peril.

Readers may be left wondering in a few places about matters like the identity and background of the first writer, Sugiyama Shigeru, author of "On Relations Among Nations" (1878), a curious void, given the useful introductions in the rest of the volume, or the particular domain of origin (Aizu) of Shiba Shirō, author of the next excerpt from the mid-1880s. In the introduction, it is also somewhat odd to read the editors' remarks on the scant number of Japanese dissidents who sought refuge in the United States during World War II, given the policy of internment and the particular details of the personal experiences of Japanese from across the political spectrum who repatriated during the war, including a

few mentioned in this collection. These, however, are minor issues in an extremely well edited compilation of voices that continue to speak to us in important ways at this point in the early twenty-first century.