

The Third Shibusawa International Confucian Seminar

(September 8-9, 2006, Princeton University)

Summary Shibusawa Ei'ichi and the United States

Masato Kimura

In this paper, I would like to clarify the characteristics of Shibusawa Ei'ichi's view of the United States and his contributions to US-Japanese relations. In particular, I will focus on Shibusawa's understanding of the United States and how his understanding related to his Confucian philosophy. It was Shibusawa's enduring view that, "The United States is a young and prosperous country based on justice and humanity, but American people are more likely to go to extremes. It takes a fairly long time to modify their opinion." Based on it, he believed that business leaders should lead so-called "kokumin gaiko" (non-government diplomacy) and improve the relationships between the United States and Japan.

As a leader of the Japanese business world and society, Shibusawa well understood the impact of the United States on the modernization of Japan, beginning with their first encounter in the 1850s. Although there have been frictions between the United States and Japan, good relations have been maintained in the area of economy and business during almost all periods (with the exception, of course, of the Pacific War period). In particular, in the 19th century, both countries viewed each other positively. The US was Japan's biggest export market. From the beginning of the 20th century, Japan increased imports from the United States, such as cotton and oil. And Japan accepted direct investment from the United States. The United States provided many examples for Japan as a large advanced country and important business partner.

In Shibusawa's view, a key insight into the United States was through study of the process of "Americanization". He found a number of interesting parallels between study of this process and his understanding of the Confucian view of governance. Shibusawa uniquely interpreted the Analects as a good guide for realization of a prosperous and peaceful modern society. In his interpretation, the Confucian view of governance was not static but dynamic and it could be adapted to organize diverse groups of people. In early 1902, Shibusawa first visited the United States as a representative of the Tokyo Chamber of Commerce. His writings from that time indicate a keen fascination with America's energetic economic power and social

organization. This visit drastically changed Shibusawa's world view, shaped originally by his year in Paris as a young man; after returning to Japan, he became one of the important mediators between the US and Japan during the final three decades of his life.

Based on his study of Europe earlier in life, and his later interest in the US, Shibusawa was most effective at interpreting and explaining the complex positions of the United States and Japan in the global setting. Shibusawa, deeply concerned about these developments, particularly in his later years, tried to harmonize the trilateral relations between the United States, China and Japan. He was convinced that this three-way relationship would be absolutely necessary for the Pacific region to maintain its peace and prosperity and he took the initiative to improve their relationship through non-government diplomacy. He demonstrated keen insight into the importance of the role of business networks for expanding Sino-US-Japanese trade and commerce as well as promoting mutual understanding among the three countries.

Shibusawa led a large Japanese business mission to the United States in 1909. Over fifty members including major business leaders and their family members and some engineers participated in that three-month long trip. They visited not only business facilities but also meet many distinguished American leaders such as President Taft and Thomas Edison. And they also visited several Universities, churches, and welfare facilities such as Gerald College in Philadelphia. Later, in a third visit to the United States in 1915, Shibusawa participated in the Panama-Pacific World Exposition, commemorating the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914. After many European countries cancelled their participation because of the outbreak of World War I, Japan's presence had significant meaning, making the exposition truly international.

Shibusawa participated in the Washington Conference for disarmament in 1921-22, as an observer for the Japanese government in support of concluding the naval disarmament treaty between major countries, including the United States, Britain, France and Japan. At this time, several insightful and forward-looking leaders in both the US and Japan tried to improve the bilateral relations in the Pacific region from the context of a new international order, as President Wilson insisted on through the League of Nations. I think Ei'ichi Shibusawa's efforts are representative of the essential response sought by Presidential Wilson's thinking.

Shibusawa facilitated opportunities for Japanese business leaders to study the American economy and society from various point of views. He believed that the goal of comprehensive understanding of the United States is essential for mutual exchange, true then as well as now. Shibusawa has been called the “Father of Japan’s modern capitalism” but, at the same time, his activities, rooted in the private sector, are also a powerful symbol of non-government diplomacy. His leadership of large and business-centered missions had a tremendous effect on public relations and public understanding in both countries. Such leadership is not his only enduring legacy; consecutive business missions between the United State and Japan, triggered by the 1909 Shibusawa Mission, established a foundation for enduring human networks between the two countries.

In an effort to clarify and resolve the two country’s’ mutual misunderstanding of each other, Shibusawa not only visited the US four times in the early 20th century but also helped establish several associations such as the Japan-America Society and the Japan Society in New York. His purpose was to promote mutual understanding between the two countries by encouraging personal exchange between them; the amicable relations that resulted were intended to ward off the possibility, in the future, of war between Japan and the US. Shibusawa also anticipated that both countries could and should play important roles in global society after WWI through collaborative contributions to the development of the Third World, in places like China and other Asian regions, and to pursue and maintain enduring peace under the auspices of the League of Nations.

Shibusawa made major contributions to the US-Japan relationship. His long life extended over *Meiji*, *Taisho*, and *Showa* and his efforts had the effect of ‘cleaning the old blood’ of Tokugawa Japan. When he introduced superior systems and rules into Japan in order to promote Japan’s modernization, Shibusawa injected new blood into an artery that he had organized, an artery that connected to a new valve in Japan’s heart. He played a similar role in US-Japanese relations through his non-governmental diplomacy. Shibusawa’s efforts were not always successful, but his ideas and activities still hold great fascination and are profoundly instructive for students of his life and of the direction of relations between the US and Japan even today.