

Trans-Pacific Relations in Transnational History  
[Preliminary Draft]

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The history of U.S.-East Asian relations has usually been examined in the framework of either national history or international history. These are both valuable and valid frameworks, but in this essay I would like to propose a third conceptual scheme, that of transnational history. These three – national, international, and transnational – are not mutually exclusive categories, and yet each has its own perspectives and assumptions about the past. Because transnational history is a rather recently emerging approach to the study of history, I shall say more about it after briefly commenting on the more traditional frameworks of national history and international history.

The national history approach to modern history takes the nation state as the key player with which individuals and groups identify themselves and to which all phenomena are linked. The history of U.S.-East Asian relations is no exception. The subject has been examined in the context of the respective histories of the United States, China, Korea, Japan, and other countries. Regarding the United States, historians have studied the ways in which Americans after the last decades of the eighteenth century went to East Asia as traders, diplomats, missionaries, or in other capacities. The “opening” of the Asian countries is seen to have been an American story, reflective of U.S. national policies, strategies, and interests. Michael Adas’ recent book, *Dominance by Design*, is a good example. In it the author argues that the American faith in the power of technology was behind the “opening” of Asia and the subsequent activities by the United States in the Asia-Pacific region.

For the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, American involvement in East Asia is usually described as having been deepened as a result of the nation’s economic and political transformation, as well as of domestic social tensions, all of which affected the ways in which the American people and their leaders looked at the world. Thus Jane Hunter relates, in *The Gospel of Gentility*, that American women missionaries

were products of their home environment whose sense of mission was closely linked to how they saw themselves and their future at home. Kristin Hoganson, in her *Fighting for American Manhood*, shows how the seemingly growing influence of women produced a psychology of manliness on the part of male politicians, which became a framework for looking at other countries. Paul Kramer, in his *The Blood of Governance*, notes that the annexation of the Philippines was seen as quite relevant to developments at home, as the Progressives sought to reform domestic society and politics by drawing lessons from the Philippine experience.

With regard to the countries of East Asia, their relations with the United States have also been linked to their respective national histories. In late-Qing history, one of the key themes has been economic and political reform, and Chinese-U.S. relations at the turn of the twentieth century have been understood in that framework. Chinese reformers turned to the United States for guidance and assistance – or else, they turned against the United States when the latter was seen to be unfair to the Chinese in America. These are all episodes in the history of modern China. The United States becomes part of Chinese history, just as China becomes part of American history in nation-centered historical presentations. In the cases of Korea and Japan, too, although in different ways, the role of the United States in their respective modernization efforts is a central theme in their national histories. What the United States government and the American people did to China, Korea, or Japan is given relevance in the overall narrative of national development.

As such examples illustrate, even when bilateral (U.S.-China, U.S.-Japan, Korea-Japan, etc.) relations are discussed, the usual framework remains the nation. Michael Hunt's classic study of U.S.-Chinese relations at the beginning of the twentieth century, *Frontier Defense and the Open Door*, for instance, examines how the two nations affected each other's politics and policies. The principal actors are the two countries, their leaders and citizens. Likewise, Peter Duus' account of Korean-Japanese relations, *The Abacus and the Sword*, recounts what individual Japanese officials and people did in Korea, and how the latter's government and society responded. Bilateral national relations do not change the essential focus on the nation state as the key unit of analysis.

But why should the narrative of national development be so central to our understanding of trans-Pacific relations? Why privilege the nation state in modern history? It is, of course, in part because the nation state *is* a privileged existence. Throughout the nineteenth century, the nation emerged as the key organizing principle in Europe and the American continent, trumping other groupings such as families, neighborhoods, classes, and religious communities. Of course, “civil society” continued to exist and was indeed strengthened even as the central state augmented its authority. But both state and society were defined within national borders. When, toward the end of the century, Asian countries began to transform themselves, the Euro-American nation provided the model. Each Asian nation was to have a central government, a constitution, a structure of law and administration, a military and police force, economic organizations, and an educational system, all supposedly contributing to the promotion of national identity and national interests.

Such being the case, the privileging of the nation in historical studies is not surprising. Such nation-centrism, however, is inadequate when we examine specific instances of the history of American-East Asian relations, or for that matter of modern world history in general. For one thing, what may presumably have given the impression of being “national” often turns out to have been also “international” and could better be explained in the framework of international history. To be sure, international history still takes the nation as the key ingredient, but, instead of treating discrete nations as independent entities, it sees them in terms of their multifaceted interactions so that a single nation is no longer an autonomous actor. All nations are members of a given “world order” (or an “international system”), and it becomes important to examine, not simply what happens to a nation’s development at a given moment in time, but also how that nation fitted into, was modified by, or challenged, the international system.

In the perspective of international history, U.S.-Asian relations during the several decades prior to the Great War would have to be understood in the context of two key developments: imperialism and internationalism. Of the two, the story of imperialism is clear and straightforward. This was the age of the new imperialism, the time when a handful of great powers dominated the world by dividing it into colonies and sphere of influence. War, diplomacy, and even peace were largely determined by what these

powers did so that, to the extent that there was some “international order” or “global governance,” it was built upon a structure of power, a geopolitical hierarchy in which a divided globe was held together through inter-imperial balance and collusion – or global order collapsed when such balance and collusion broke down.

Trans-Pacific relations, too, can easily be fitted into such a framework. The empire, rather than the nation, was the key, with the United States and Japan acting as colonial powers and China and Korea becoming objects of their imperialism. The United States and Japan colluded to maintain a system of imperial control over East Asia – until the former began espousing the cause of Chinese (but not Korean) nationalism, causing a fissure in U.S.-Japanese relations. Why the United States opted for the support of Chinese nationalism against Japanese imperialism is an important question, but this cannot be examined solely in the framework of their respective national policies. This was an age of imperial realignment, with Japan coming closer to Britain, France, and Russia against the potential rivalry of Germany and the United States. However, in East Asia, American imperialism began to take the form, not of siding with Germany against the other empires, but of recognizing the potency of anti-imperialistic forces that were becoming visible in Qing China. (Why the Americans nevertheless failed to support Korean anti-imperialism is another matter.) For the age of the new imperialism was also the first age of anti-colonial nationalism throughout the globe, forcing the nations of the world to define their responses.

While the globe was becoming divided into empires and colonies and into imperialist blocs, and while anti-imperialism was pushing colonial people to a vision of independent nationhood, a vision of the world consisting of separate national entities, there were also forces moving in the opposite direction, to bring nations of the world closer together. This phenomenon, internationalism, is also a part of international history, and the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries saw some significant development of internationalism. As I have argued in *Cultural Internationalism and World Order*, these developments could be seen in the growth of internationalist thought as well as of international conferences and conventions to produce a more peaceful world order. To what extent Chinese, Korean, and Japanese thinkers and officials played their roles in the development of internationalism is a subject that awaits study. For instance, how did they

respond to such internationalist initiatives as the founding of the International Telegraph Union (1865) or the creation of the International Statistical Institute (1885), two of numerous such organizations that did much to promote international cooperation among nations and peoples. Concerning international conferences, it is well known that both China and Japan (as well as the United States) sent delegations to the 1899 Hague peace conference that resulted in the promulgation of laws of war (such as prohibition of the use of poison gas) and the establishment of a permanent court of arbitration. Altogether twenty-six countries participated in the conference, but Korea was not among them. (Besides China and Japan, Siam and Turkey were the only non-Western nations that were represented at the Hague.) When the Korean king sought to send his officials to the second Hague conference, in 1907, they were barred from participation at Japan's insistence that the latter now represented the peninsular kingdom's external affairs. Here was an instance where imperialism and internationalism collided, to the detriment of the latter. It is interesting to note, in this connection, that such countries as Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Panama, which were virtual protectorates of the United States, participated in this conference. The contrast might suggest that whereas Japan held on to its imperialistic orientation, the United States was willing to embrace a measure of internationalism, a trans-Pacific divergence that was to prove of crucial importance in the subsequent history of the region. In any event, historians have noted that forces of internationalism were never totally destroyed even during the Great War. Internationalism would prove resilient and ultimately more influential than imperialism. The history of U.S.-East Asian relations can be put in the context of such a global drama.

Whereas internationalism still involves nations and thus conceptualizes the world as consisting of a number of independent nation states, albeit pursuing cooperative rather than conflictual relations, it must also be recognized that individuals and groups of people, as well as the ideas and goods they produce and exchange, are not always defined by their national identities. People, ideas, and goods frequently cross borders and in the process attenuate, if not losing completely, their national labels. To refer to such phenomena, the term "international" is misleading, and for this and other reasons historians have begun using the word "transnational." Transnational history, then, is an approach to the past that does not prioritize the nation but takes cognizance of the

movement and circulation of humans and goods transcending national boundaries. Such a framework seems particularly useful when studying the history of U.S.-East Asian relations.

The term “transnational” is of rather recent origin. The *Oxford English Dictionary* did not list it till 1933, when the supplementary volume defined it as “extending beyond national bonds or frontiers.” This is a plausible definition, but one had to wait till the 1986 supplement of the *OED* to be provided with some examples. It cites a 1973 article from *Reader’s Digest*: “Terrorism...is ‘transnational’ in scope – that is, there is a kind of global brotherhood of terrorists who share basic beliefs and techniques.” Such a quote suggests that it was around that time that consciousness of transnational connections grew (transnationally, as it were). But such connections had always existed, and the period around the turn of the twentieth century was particularly rich in transnational forces and movements. Technological and economic globalization is the most obvious example. At a time when nationalism and imperialism were tending to divide the globe into competing units, forces of globalization were bringing nations and regions together through improvements in transportation and communications technology, which in turn facilitated the movement of goods and capital across borders.

It is true that most economic transactions took place within and between nations, so globalization undoubtedly contributed to the economic and, as a result, military strengthening of the powers. At the same time, however, there is no denying that such circulation of goods and capital was bringing distant parts of the world into closer contact, with the result that some parallel phenomena began to develop in different countries. Urbanization and consumer culture are but two of the most obvious examples. Rather than viewing urbanization in the United States and in Japan, for instance, as two separate phenomena, as episodes in their national histories, it will make more sense to see it as part of a global development. It is not surprising, therefore, as Daniel Rodgers has shown in his *Atlantic Crossings*, that solutions to many problems of urbanization (congestion, water supply, public health, etc.) were being proposed transnationally – not just across the Atlantic but also across the Pacific. To cite another example, the idea of the welfare state, a typically twentieth-century phenomenon, was a product of globalization and knew no national boundaries.

Nothing was more striking in the age of globalization than the movement of people across continents and oceans on a scale unprecedented in history. It is well established that some fifty million Europeans crossed the Atlantic in the decades prior to 1914. What is less well understood is that this was but one of several waves of human movement that took place in the same period. As Dirk Hoeder, Wang Gungwu, and others have shown, these waves included the exodus of between thirty and fifty million Asians (mostly Indians and Chinese) out of their homelands to North America, Pacific islands, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, as well as the eastbound movement of some ten million Russians towards trans-Caspian and Siberian regions. These huge waves of migration were not just episodes in national histories but signaled the coming into contact on a massive scale of people from different parts of the world. As a result, nations became more multi-ethnic than ever before, but, at the same time, most diasporic populations retained their own identities so that their family, ethnic, and other ties. In the age of the nation state, the migrants were developing supra-national consciousness.

Of course, the coming into closer contact of huge numbers of people of different races gave rise to friction and even conflict. Among the best remembered episodes in U.S.-East Asian relations are immigration disputes involving Chinese and Japanese laborers in the United States. But we need to view these incidents not as exceptional or as unique to these countries but as part of a global phenomenon. As Michael Geyer and Charles Bright have argued in their celebrated 1995 article in the *American Historical Review*, just as national boundaries were coming down due to the global movement of goods and capital, racial barriers were being erected to segregate different races. This happened in all the European colonies in Asia and Africa, as well as within the United States. Individuals of diverse racial backgrounds came together usually as masters and servants. Personal friendships might be formed between representatives of different races, but when intimate relations were forged between men and women, their liaisons were almost always considered illicit, out of bounds of their respective social norms. Offspring of “mixed” marriages were discriminated against more severely than they had been in the earlier centuries.

The story of racial discrimination in U.S.-Asian relations is well known, but it should be more properly understood in the context of the global encounter of races and ethnic

groups, in other words, not in the usual framework of national and international affairs. Even national self-determination, the idea that Woodrow Wilson espoused at the Paris peace conference, did not mean racial equality. When he talked of a new diplomacy on the basis of the idea of the community of nations, “nations” here meant sovereign states, not ethnic entities. It was not surprising, therefore, that he was cool to the Chinese and Japanese proposal for including a provision about racial equality in the preamble of the League of Nations covenant. Equality among nations, not racial equality, would provide the basis of the postwar world order. It did not work, not just because the United States did not participate in the League and because China and Japan continued to fight over various issues, but also because the League was not built on the idea that inter-racial relations were just as critical as international relations in any definition of global order. In such a context, U.S.-Asian relations would have to be seen as an aspect of the worldwide confrontation among races and ethnic groups.

Races and ethnic identities, however, were not the only challenges to nation states as the sole definers of global governance. Equally important were civilizations. They had existed for ages, but in the nineteenth century, “civilization” had come to be equated with the modern West, a product of the Enlightenment. There was no “encounter” among civilizations other than the mastery of the West over others, which, in their turn, sought to transform themselves by emulating the former. Around 1900, however, other civilizations – Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, Confucian – began to assert themselves not simply in competition with one another in their respective attempts to Westernize themselves, but in terms of their own integrity and autonomy. In other words, exponents of civilizational integrity argued that certain qualities of a civilization never changed, and that non-Western civilizations possessed strengths that were equal or even superior to those of the West. To the argument that the modern West exemplified such characteristics as material progress, prosperity, or individual liberty, spokesmen for other civilizations often responded by pointing to their spiritual legacy, communal loyalty, or unity with nature. No matter how phrased, such assertiveness, coupled with global population movements, created tension, giving rise to various discourses in the West as well as the non-West about the future of civilization, or civilizations. Many episodes in the history of U.S.-East



Asian relations at the turn of the twentieth century can be fitted into such a phenomenon, which was more transnational than international.

For example, various expositions held in the United States, including the world fairs in Chicago (1893), St. Louis (1903), and Panama (1914), brought intellectuals, artists, religious leaders, and artisans from India, China, Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and elsewhere to meet with each other and with their American counterparts. These were moments in the encounter among civilizations in which efforts were made to promote mutual understanding. Opinions were divided between those who believed that civilizations were fundamentally in conflict with one another and those who thought ultimately they would come to constitute parts of a grand synthesis, but such discourses were not interchangeable with ordinary national or international discussions, and in many ways they would prove to be more enduring, for national interests come and go, while civilizational imperatives may never change.

There are many other themes in transnational history into which U.S.-East Asian relations may be fitted. Several of us are working on a Dictionary of Transnational History, which we intend as a guide to the history of transnational themes and developments. We have chosen about five hundred topics for inclusion. They include, besides migrations, urbanization, and consumer society that were already mentioned, such subjects as “women’s movement,” “refugees,” “banking,” “beauty,” “diseases,” “utopias,” “justice,” and “statistics.” They can, of course, be examined in separate national contexts, but it will be just as important to understand these subjects as essentially transnational. At least, they have become transnational matters so that to study the history of U.S.-East Asian relations is in part to explore how this transition into transnationalism has taken place, and what roles the separate countries have played in the process. This, rather than the usual story of foreign policy and strategy, would seem to be particularly appropriate today, when there are said to be 200 million refugees in the world, 960 million Internet users, 500 million tourists, eighteen million container ships, over 30,000 multinational enterprises, 40,000 international non-governmental organizations, and many other transnational entities, not to mention transnational diseases, natural disasters, and environmental hazards. One of the key issues today would be how Americans and Asians, and all others from other parts of the globe, will be able to

cooperate in coping with these shared crises, for which the traditional national framework as well as intergovernmental organizations would seem to be inadequate. But we need not just focus on the present but make use of contemporary perspectives so as to shed fresh light on the past.