

**Japan Studies in the United States –  
Past and Present Perspectives**

**By**

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## 1. Introduction

The study of Japan in the United States is a mature area of academic endeavor with a lengthy history that dates from the 1930s. Over three hundred and thirty American institutions of higher learning, both colleges and universities, host programs of study about Japan. But study of Japan alone is viewed as too narrowly specialized, at least prior to enrolment in a Ph.D. program. Only a very small number of institutions offer the Bachelor of Arts degree in “Japan Studies.” Virtually all undergraduate programs have integrated the study of Japan into their broader curriculum as an integral element of “Asian” or “East Asian” studies degree programs.

These programs accent a geographically broad interdisciplinary approach to learning about Japan that includes the study of at least the Japanese language. The programs are often augmented with study in Japan for one or two semesters. Most institutions that encourage study in Japan belong to one of a few consortia that emphasize Japanese language study either in Kyoto or Tokyo.

The leading professional association for academics and students engaged in the study of Japan is the University of Michigan based Association for Asian Studies (AAS) which has more than 6,000 members around the world. It promotes the interdisciplinary study of all areas of Asia.

The academic work of these colleges and university programs, and the AAS is enhanced by the activities of large and financially well endowed foundations and institutions. Some of these organizations, which are both government and privately funded, specialize in promoting Japan studies at all levels of American society. Consequently the American public is relatively well versed about Japan.

## 2. Genesis of Japan Studies

The needs of missionaries gave rise to the formal study and teaching about East Asia, including Japan, during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century but the needs of the United States government during World War II in the Pacific fostered East Asian studies as it is known today in the United States. Edwin O. Reischauer is widely recognized as the father of Japan studies in the United States. Actually this son of an American missionary who grew up in Japan to become an accomplished scholar, Harvard University Professor of Japanese History and US Ambassador to Japan owes much to his mentors who came from Europe, East Asia and the United States.

When Reischauer commenced his academic career in Japan studies at Oberlin College in the late 1920s, only Harvard, Columbia University and the University of California at Berkeley offered a few courses about Chinese and Japanese history. His first interest was China, not Japan. From Oberlin, Reischauer followed his older brother to Harvard in 1931. (Note: The older brother pioneered the study of Japan at Harvard, but died from injuries suffered during the Japanese bombing of Shanghai in 1937.)

At Harvard Reischauer was compelled to begin his study of East Asia by taking Chinese language courses. It was not until Serge Elisseeff, possibly the leading European scholar in the field of Japanese studies, arrived at Harvard University that Reischauer had a mentor. Elisseeff, the grandson of a Russian merchant, broke with his family's mercantile tradition and went to Japan in 1908 where he enrolled at Tokyo Imperial University. Eventually he returned to Russia but fled after the revolution to France where he established himself as a professor of Sinology studies at the Sorbonne.

In 1933, as Reischauer recalled in his 1986 autobiography *My Life Between Japan and America*, Professor Elisseff invited Reischauer to pursue a five year program of study abroad aimed at gaining a Ph.D. in Far Eastern Languages, at the time the only degree program Harvard offered in East Asian Studies. The program called for two years in Paris and three years in Japan, Korea and China. In Europe Reischauer concentrated on learning French and studying classical Chinese.

In accordance with his first academic love of ancient China and Buddhism, Reischauer selected as his Ph.D. thesis the translation into English of the 9<sup>th</sup> Century Japanese Buddhist monk Ennin's diary. (Ennin, after extensive travel and study of Buddhism in China and Korea returned to Japan where he is credited with the establishment of *Motsuji* Temple in 850. Located near the more famous *Chusonji* Temple of Iwate prefecture, *Motsuji* is famous for its *Jodo*-style garden where the famous Japanese film director Kurosawa staged one of his highly regarded scenes.) Twenty years later Reischauer's translation was published in two volumes as *The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law*, and *Ennin's Travels in T'ang China*. Reischauer won his Ph.D. in history and promptly began teaching Chinese at Harvard University.

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 profoundly benefited the study of Japan in the United States. Immediately there was an urgent need for Americans with knowledge of Japan, particularly the Japanese language. Reischauer, being one of the few professors in the United States then with extensive knowledge of Japan, was quickly drawn into government service to help orchestrate the expansion of Japan studies. First he was called upon to organize a Japanese language program at Harvard University for

US military officers. After one year the program was moved to the University of Colorado and combined with a similar program established earlier at the University of California at Berkeley. (Note: The Japanese language program was placed in Colorado because the Japanese-American instructors were barred from living within 200 miles of the U.S. Pacific coast.)

Reischauer moved to Washington, DC to assist with US government efforts to break Japan's diplomatic and military codes. There he helped organized at Arlington Hall school (which eventually became headquarters for the US Army's code breaking branch called the Army Security Agency) the training of crypto-analysts in the breaking of codes. He concentrated on this work until war's end. Many of his students later became leading scholars in the study of Japan across the United States. His wartime experience ended with service in the Department of State advising about the post-war occupation of Japan. But growing distrust of so-called "area specialists" among American politicians late in the war compelled the State Department to replace "Japan specialists" with China specialists to formulate and implement plans for the occupation of Japan.

In 1945 Reischauer returned to Harvard University to resume his academic career. One consequence of his war time experience was his writing and publication of *Japan Past and Present*. This relatively short and highly readable book was destined to become the standard textbook for the introductory study of Japanese history in the United States. A revised and enlarged version was published in 1970 under the title, *Japan Past and Present: The Story of a Nation*.

Another major contribution to the study of Japan and East Asia was the birth of “rice paddies,” the basic introductory course in East Asian history offered at Harvard University. This was the brain child of Reischauer’s mentor John King Fairbank, an historian with little formal training in East Asian studies. Fairbank’s early focus had been Europe’s expansion into East Asia, particularly China. Fortunately for future students of East Asian studies in the United States, both scholars opposed treating Asian studies as an area of academic specialization. Instead, they agreed to merge the study of Japan and China into a single area called East Asian studies. Their “rice paddies” course was designed to excite undergraduate interest in the study of East Asia.

Subsequently they established two degree programs at Harvard University that eventually became the standard for East Asian studies programs at other American institutions of higher education. The M.A. program acquired the name East Asian regional studies. The two year program required the study of Chinese and Japanese plus the interdisciplinary study of both China and Japan. Candidates for a Ph.D. in East Asian studies were required to pursue an additional five year program in Chinese, Japanese, either a European language or a third East Asian language, plus a variety of courses in three distinct academic areas. This program led to a Ph.D. in History and East Asian Languages. Variations were allowed if a Ph.D. candidate was able to organize a committee of three professors to oversee their program of study.

Reischauer was able to escape relatively unharmed by the McCarthyism “Red Scare” of the 1950s, but many early scholars of East Asian studies were falsely accused of disloyalty to the United States. Among them was John Service, a Foreign Service officer who studied with Reischauer at Oberlin College and became an expert on China.

Senator McCarthy groundlessly labeled Service “pro-communist.” Disgraced, Service was forced to resign his commission and retire to an obscure life in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Many American academics and US government officials disassociated themselves from professors of East Asian studies out of a conviction that knowledge of China, Japan, Korea, etc. somehow diluted one’s loyalty to the United States. Others in the US government and academia assumed that the Marxist orientation of many of Japan’s scholars in Asian studies had tainted the views of America’s East Asian “experts” with Marxist and communist perspectives. This bias infected academia’s relations with the US government well into the 1980s.

It also barred many of America’s “Asia experts” from qualifying for security clearances needed to work in the US government. Until after the Vietnam War, Americans with parents or spouses born in an Asian nation, regardless of whether they were US citizens, were barred from obtaining a security clearance. At the same time, Americans whose parents were spouses were born in Europe or Australia did not face a similar barrier to government service. The rule was suspended for nearly three decades until President George Bush restored it following the 9/11 New York terrorism incident.

President John Kennedy sought to bridge the gap between academia and government by appointing several prominent scholars to high ranking positions in his administration. Presidential appointees were excused from the rule that required both parents and/or spouse be born in the United States. Reischauer was selected to serve as U.S. ambassador to Japan. But after Kennedy’s assassination many of the scholars the president had appointed to government office returned to academia. Reischauer persisted but eventually left government because of opposition to the Vietnam War.

Ultimately American higher education benefited from the exodus of academics out of government. Scholars in East Asian studies with experience in both government and teaching acquired positions in the growing number of M.A. and Ph.D. programs established in the 1960s. The Ford and Rockefeller Foundations funded many of the new academic positions in East Asian studies and the expansion of library collections about East Asia. Simultaneously the US Congress established the National Defense Foreign Language Fellowship program late in the Eisenhower Administration. This made it possible for an increasing number of American students to pursue the study of Asian languages at the M.A. and Ph.D. levels.

These developments fostered a new direction for Asian studies after the Vietnam War. As explained in subsequent sections of this paper, enhancement of the general public's understanding of Asia and East Asia began in earnest after 1965. Programs and materials for the study of Asia and East Asia at the pre-college level, sparked partially by a thirst about Vietnam during the war, also rapidly multiplied. What had begun in the 1930s as the pursuit of knowledge considered exotic and of marginal significance had a half century later merged with the main stream of education across the United States. Edwin Reischauer, his mentors and early colleagues are largely responsible for this accomplishment.

### **3. American Higher Education and Japan Studies**

Originally in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, scholars in Europe and North America tended to marginalize the study of Asia as being exotic of little academic significance. This perception was largely a consequence of Europe's 19<sup>th</sup> Century imperialistic perception of the world. Scholars looked at Asia from their home universities in Europe and

declared everything east of Europe to be “oriental” and thus inferior to the “occident,” i.e. Europe. Looking east from their universities in Great Britain, France and Germany, they further divided the world into the “near East” and the “Far East.” In the United States, this perception was reflected in the assignment of “Oriental” or “Far East Studies” to the American Oriental Society.

Early American scholars of East Asia under the leadership of Hugh Borton, an early student of Japanese history based at Columbia University, broke with tradition as Europe’s imperial order collapsed during World War II. Borton early in 1941 established the Far Eastern Association and with it *The Far Eastern Quarterly* which eventually became the leading academic journal in the area of Asian studies.

When Edwin Reischauer was elected president of this association in 1955, he changed the name to the Association for Asian Studies and the journal became the *Journal of Asian Studies*. Today the AAS, as it is usually called, is recognized internationally as the leading professional organization in the field of Asian studies. Key members of the AAS soon standardized the names for Asia’s different regions. In the process, they disassociated the names for Asia’s regions from Europe’s earlier versions. Instead, the “Far East” and “Orient” became “East Asia” which was further divided into “Northeast and Southeast Asia.” South Asia was assigned to the nations east of Pakistan and divided into “South Asia” (India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan) and “Southeast Asia” (Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, etc.). Today the AAS is further organized into regional councils that include the Council on Northeast Asia. Within this council committees are organized according to national specialization.

***Integration into the Liberal Arts Curriculum***

The intent of these changes was three fold. First, professors of Asian studies sought to integrate the study of Asia into the main stream liberal arts curriculum. Toward this end they disassociated the nations of Asia from their colonial past. Secondly, they sought to counter conventional wisdom that claimed the study of Asia was of marginal significance relative to Europe focused subjects. Finally these scholars endeavored to establish that the study of Asia would not lead to excessive specialization relative to liberal arts’ goal of promoting a broad comprehension of the human experience. By the 1970s America’s students of Asia had largely succeeded in overcoming the parochial inclinations of their European oriented colleagues and their Euro-centered academic disciplines.

***“Japan Studies” verse “East Asian Studies”***

Consistent with these efforts, most colleges and universities in the United States have opted to integrate single nation studies into broader degree programs. Thus “Japan studies” as an academic degree program has virtually disappeared in the United States as evident in Chart I below.

**Chart 1. “Japan Studies” verse  
“Asian or East Asian Studies”**  
(Source: Association for Asian Studies)

Asian Studies Programs	137	41.9%
East Asian Studies Programs	78	23.9%
South Asian Studies Programs	18	5.5%
Southeast Asian Studies Programs	8	5.0%
Asian-American Studies Programs	10	3.0%
Korean Studies Programs	31	9.3%
<b>Japan Studies Programs</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>8.9%</b>
China Studies Programs	17	5.0%
Totals	327	100.0%

According to the Association for Asian Studies, only 29 or 8.9% of 327 institutions of higher learning in the United States host “Japan Studies” programs as an entity separate from other academic programs. This percentage is consistent with the general pattern for Akita International University’s partner institutions. But in the majority of the cases represented in Chart I, the “Japan Studies” programs concentrate on the study of the Japanese language and are not an interdisciplinary degree program. For the most part, “Japan studies” has been integrated into the liberal arts curriculum as an integral part of a degree program in Asian or East Asian studies. Actually only one university and four colleges in the United States now host “Japan Studies” B.A. degree programs (see Chart III below).

Instead of studying only about Japan, most undergraduate and graduate students alike are required to concentrate on the study of Asia or East Asia, much as Reischauer was required in the 1930s. Consistent with the AAS designations, Asia encompasses the entire Asian continent from India east to Japan, and from China and Korea south to Indonesia. Excluded are the nations of the Middle East or “Western Asia” that encompass the Arab/Islamic cultural region (Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, etc.). The term “East Asia” is more narrowly focused and is sub-divided into Northeast and Southeast Asia. Northeast Asia includes: China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Mongolia. The region from the Philippines south to Indonesia, including Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Myanmar are placed in Southeast Asia.

### ***Interdisciplinary Degree Programs without Specialization***

Undergraduate and Master degree students are required to study a geographically broader region rather than a single nation, as well as develop an interdisciplinary

perspective of their chosen region. In short, they learn to place their selected nation within a broad cultural and interdisciplinary context. The only area of permitted specialization is in the study of a single Asian language at the B.A. and M.A. levels.

Candidates for the Ph.D. are also barred from concentrating on a single nation. They must establish competency in three languages (usually Chinese and Japanese plus one European language) and an interdisciplinary knowledge of three areas of study. For my Ph.D. degree at Harvard University, I was required to study modern Chinese, classical Chinese, modern Japanese and modern Korean as well as medieval and early modern Chinese history, medieval and modern Japanese history, and Korean history. Prior to this study, I had also studied at the undergraduate level French, political science and American history.

Charts II and III below document that Asian and East Asian Studies are fully integrated into the liberal arts curriculum of US higher education. All but three states (South and North Dakota, Wyoming which all have relatively small populations) have institutions of higher with programs in either Asian or East Asian studies. The states with the largest populations (California and New York) host more than twelve institutions each with Asian/East Asian Studies programs.

**Chart II. Geographical Distribution of All  
“Asian/East Asian Studies” Programs**  
(Source: Association for Asian Studies)

States with none (North & South Dakota, Wyoming)	3
States with 1 or 2 institutions	23
States with 3 or 4 institutions	9
States with 5 or 6 institutions	9
States with 7 to 11 institutions	3
(Ohio, Pennsylvania and Illinois)	
States with more than 12 institutions	3

The majority of Asian/East Asian studies programs are at universities (see Chart III below). But 58 colleges now host B.A. degrees in these fields of study and the number continues to increase. “Japan Studies” degree programs, however, remain the exception and have not increased for some time.

**Chart III. Universities and Colleges with  
“Asian/East Asian Studies” Programs**

(Source: Association for Asian Studies)

Universities	145*
Colleges	58
Colleges with Japan Studies	4**

\* Includes four “think tanks” based in Washington, D.C. The University of Washington is the only university to offer a B.A. in “Japan Studies.”

\*\* College of Charleston, Gustavas Adolphus College, Middleburg College and Wellesley College

***Study Abroad in Japan***

Most Asian and East Asian studies programs do not require that undergraduates study abroad, but it is encouraged if financially possible for the student. Graduate students, particularly in Ph.D. programs, are generally required to live in East Asia for at least one, preferably two semesters prior to completing their degree.

The primary purpose for going abroad is to pursue language study in a student’s nation of primary interest. To facilitate this, several leading universities and colleges that host Asian/East Asian Studies programs belong to a consortium of institutions that encourage study abroad. The Associated Kyoto Program hosted by Doshisha University in Kyoto is the largest such consortium. It hosts students from 38 nations, including 34 US colleges and universities. Each semester (September-March or April-September) 65

students from American institutions are admitted to the two part academic program (*Nichibun* program). Students usually spend two academic semesters in intensive Japanese language study (*Bekka* Program) held in the morning and take liberal arts courses in the afternoon.

A second highly regarded exchange program is the Kyoto Consortium for Japanese Studies organized by Columbia University in association with the Universities of Michigan and Virginia. This program provides an “intensive, two semester academic program primarily for undergraduates who wish to do advanced work in Japanese language and Japanese studies.” Consortium members include: Boston University, Brown University, the University of Chicago, Columbia University/Barnard College, Cornell University, Emory University, Harvard University, University of Pennsylvania, Princeton University, Stanford University, Washington University in St. Louis and Yale University.

A third consortium is the Inter-University Center for Japanese Language Studies sponsored by Stanford University. Established in 1963, it is based in Yokohama, Japan. The program provides ten months training in advanced Japanese for a select number of undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate students. Most of its students aspire to careers in academia, business and government. Some 1,600 persons have completed the program since its initiation.

#### **4. Public Diplomacy and “Japan Studies”**

The study of Japan in the United States also benefits from the work and financial support of several government and private organizations. They fund library acquisition programs, graduate and post-doctorate research fellowships for study in

Japan, and the endowment of tenured academic positions at selected universities. Other similar organizations fund public education programs and elementary and high school teacher programs that encourage teaching about and travel to Japan. The more prominent of these organizations are: The Japan Foundation, Japan Society, Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation, and the United States-Japan Foundation. The Asia Society, a privately funded institution, sponsors a wide variety of programs for the general public about all areas of Asia, including Japan.

Additional financial support for faculty exchange and research programs is available from the US government sponsored Fulbright Program and the Japanese government's Japan Foundation and JET program. Also the US Congress partially funds the Mansfield Center which assists US government officials wishing to study in Japan. The U.S. Department of State partially funds and assists in sponsoring public speeches and discussions about a wide range of foreign policy topics that encompass US-Japan relations.

Finally there are key privately funded "think tanks" in New York and Washington, DC that host scholars and government officials from both nations to study bilateral US-Japan foreign, security and trade policies, politics and related issues. These include the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), Brookings Institute, Carnegie Endowment for Peace, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Council on Foreign Relations, the Heritage Foundation, and the Sasagawa Foundation.

### ***The Japan Foundation***

The most financially well endowed organization that promotes the study of Japan in the United States is the Japan Foundation. Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs

manages the organization and funds it with the proceeds from Japanese passport fees. The foundation's activities are global in scope. Within the United States, the foundation invests several million dollars annually to promote "Japan studies" by funding research fellowships (graduate and post-doctoral), grants for staff and library expansion, conferences, Japanese language study, and sponsors art exhibitions and performances. In 2007, the foundation awarded some \$3.8 million to 36 individuals and 321 institutions in the United States to promote "better understanding of Japanese culture, arts, language and society and to promotions of Japanese cultural relations" between Japan and the United States.

### ***Japan Society of New York***

The Japan Society is a private United States based organization with its headquarters in New York and a branch office in San Francisco. It receives financial support from the Japan Foundation, the City of New York and the Freeman Foundation. In addition to hosting lectures on Japanese topics by prominent experts, the Society sponsors art exhibitions and performances of Japanese performing arts and films. Its New York office organizes educational programs for students from pre-school to high school plus adult education programs. One of its most respected programs sponsors workshops and three week tours of Japan for elementary and high school students each summer. The Society also sponsors a Corporate Program that hosts public and invitation-only programs for the international business and foreign policy community to discuss bilateral US-Japan issues. The program annually hosts events that attract more than 2,500 business executives.

### ***Maureen and Mike Mansfield Foundation***

This foundation was established by former U.S. Senator and scholar of Japan studies Mike Mansfield and his wife in 1984 to promote better understanding and cooperation between the United States and Japan. The foundation is funded by proceeds from the senator's endowment, the Japan Foundation and US Congress. The Mike Mansfield Fellowship Program allows a small number of US federal employees to develop a detailed knowledge of how the Japanese government works. Awardees reside for two years in Japan where they observe up close their Japanese counterparts in business, government and other professions, and form professional relationships. Since the fellowship program began in 1994, 91 American officials from 22 federal government agencies have studied in Japan. The foundation also sponsors a series of "Capital Hill Area Policy Dialogues" that bring together members of the US Congress and their staff with experts to discuss issues of mutual importance to the United States and Japan.

### ***United States – Japan Foundation***

This foundation shares the same goals as its larger cousins, the Japan Foundation and the Japan Society, specifically the promotion of "stronger ties between Americans and Japanese by supporting projects that foster mutual knowledge and education, deepen understanding, create effective channels of communication, and address common concerns in an increasingly interdependent world." Also like its cousin institutions, the foundation's offices are in New York and Tokyo, and it too receives funding from the Japan Foundation and the US Congress. It distinguishes itself by sponsoring programs for pre-college level educators, i.e. elementary, middle and high school teachers. These programs promote the integration of "Japan studies" into pre-college curricula and

Japanese language study at the pre-college level. Other programs concentrate on facilitating closer and smoother bilateral trade relations between the United States and Japan.

## **5. American Perceptions of Japan**

The study of Japan in the United States has virtually erased from the American people's minds the negative imagines of Japan fostered by legacies of racism and World War II. This is best illustrated by the annual survey that Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has conducted since 1960. The survey polls two groups of Americans, one the "general public" and the other "opinion leaders." The 2009 survey polled 1,500 US citizens over the age of 18 who live in the United States and another 253 professional persons working in government, business, academia, the mass media, religion and labor unions. According to the "2009 U.S. Image of Japan Study," the majority of Americans rate Japan as a country with:

Great traditions and culture	(96%)
Strong economy and high technology	(88%)
Beautiful nature	(85%)
Peaceful country	(84%)

Equally important is the American general public's perception that Japan is a:

Dependable ally	(80%)
US-Japan Cooperation is excellent or good	(73%)
Japan is U.S. most important partner	(46%)

The charts on the next two pages establish that the survey's overall trend since it commenced in 1960 is generally positive.

## 6. Conclusion

The efforts of American educators, obviously ably assisted by their Japanese counterparts, to integrate the study of Japan into the liberal arts curriculum of United State's institutions of higher education have been highly successful. From its humble start as an academic enterprise considered of marginal educational importance, the study of Japan has flourished in the United States. This accomplishment most likely would not have been possible had American educators maintained "Japan Studies" as a separate pursuit. Fortunately for "Japan Studies," the American public and Japan, the study of Japan was integrated into the broader liberal arts curriculum at many universities and colleges across the United States. This has enabled Americans in all professions to acquire at least an appreciation for Japan's accomplishments and to understand the benefits of the increasingly close cooperation between the United States and Japan since 1945. Also, because Japan Studies in the United States has not been conducted in isolation, American educators and students are able to perceive Japan and its significance in a global context.

Nor have the public diplomacy programs by public education organizations such as the Japan Foundation gone unnoticed. A direct consequence of them is that the American public, professionals in government and business, and pre-college educators have a keen appreciation and understanding of Japan, US-Japan relations and Japan's global role. Similarly Americans have an accurate image of Japan, its people, and their accomplishments. Although "Japan Studies" has almost disappeared from US higher education, the study of Japan is no longer considered "exotic." On the contrary, it is now a significant and integral element of liberal arts education in the United States.

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