

Historical Perspective on Japan-U.S. Relations

Interview with Shigeharu Matsumoto,
chairman of International House of Japan
by Masao Kunihiro

Born in Osaka in 1899, Shigeharu Matsumoto was an internationalist distressed at Japan's slide into war. Believing that personal understanding is the key to keeping international differences from escalating, he was a key figure in the 1952 establishment of the International House of Japan (Kokusai Bunka Kaikan). Today, "I-House" is an important force for cultural and academic exchange, and Matsumoto continues to champion the cause of world peace with particular attention to relations between and among Japan, the United States, China and the Soviet Union.

Kunihiro: *Prior to and at the beginning of World War II, you were an active international journalist. What led you to pursue a career in journalism?*

Matsumoto: I had already decided against a staid job with the government or private industry when I graduated from the Tokyo Imperial University Law School in 1923, and I knew I wanted to be a lawyer, a journalist, a university professor or something else like that. Yet less than a year after I started graduate school, Tokyo was leveled by the Great Kanto Earthquake. Since all of my things had been lost in the raging fires that ensued, I decided to make a new start and continue my studies in the United States, and I left Japan in late December 1923.

In the United States I met the great historian Charles Beard, and he and his

wife Mary introduced me to a number of people and opened a lot of important doors for me, including the opportunity to lecture in New York and to have some pieces published in *The Nation* and other magazines. These articles, on topics such as Japanese labor problems,



Shigeharu Matsumoto, chairman of International House of Japan

the way democracy was shaping up in Japan and other issues, were very well received, and this encouragement decided me on journalism.

In the March 1925 issue of *The Nation*, the same issue as my first article, Beard also had an article which was to affect me profoundly. In this article Beard said that if Japan and the United States went to war, it would be over China. After repeated readings of this article, I had to agree with Beard and ever since then I have been extremely sensitive to China's importance in Japan-U.S. relations.

Q: *Anti-Japanese sentiment was growing in America around that time, as epitomized by the 1924 Immigration Act effectively barring any further immigration from Japan. Did you find strong anti-Japanese sentiment where you were?*

A: That was mainly a West Coast phenomenon, and feelings did not run as high in the east. Still, with rabble-rousing by people like Senator Hiram Johnson (R-Calif.), more and more people began to believe that Japanese were too different to be assimilated into American society. Because Japanese shops stayed open on Sundays, for example, Johnson argued that they were taking work away from "native" Americans. Something had to be done, he cried, and the result was the Immigration Act of 1924.

America is often described as a melting pot, but the major influx of East European immigrants that began around 1890

filled the pot to overflowing. New immigrants were not being assimilated, and the Japanese were singled out.

Still, there were many responsible Americans who understood that even though the Japanese are a proud people, there was no reason they could not assimilate. This view was accepted in the east, but in California the Japanese were accused of being standoffish and refusing to adapt to American ways.

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China is extremely important in Japan-U.S. relations.

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Q: *You were appointed Domei News Agency's Shanghai Bureau Chief after the 1931 Manchurian Incident. What led up to this important post?*

A: I left the United States for Europe in 1925, determined to become an international journalist. For nearly two years I traveled through France, Switzerland and Austria, returning to Tokyo Imperial University in 1927 to work on my doctorate and to become an assistant in an American studies program set up in the Law School with funding from American banker A. Barton Hepburn to promote cultural exchange and brake the deterioration in Japan-U.S. relations.

Q: *You have said elsewhere that the Institute of Pacific Relations's third Pacific Council Meeting in Kyoto in October 1929 was another thing that pushed you into international journalism. Can you tell us about that?*

A: The Institute of Pacific Relations had been established as a private forum for discussing political, economic, social and cultural issues, and its membership included politicians, scholars and journalists from Japan, the United States, China, Great Britain, Canada and the Philippines. There were also observers from the Soviet Union and France at this third meeting. Arnold Toynbee, who was 40 at the time, gave a public lecture warning that absolutist nations inevitably find themselves embroiled in wars, and that a nation that wants to avoid annihilation should discard its absolutist claims and stop regarding war as a tool of national policy.

The Japanese delegation in Kyoto was headed by former League of Nations Under-Secretary-General Inazo Nitobe. Nitobe stressed that Japan and China should make greater efforts to understand and accept each other, and that this was important not only to our two countries but to the whole world.

Q: *Wasn't there talk of your going to the United States about then?*

A: I had become acquainted with a number of influential people at Pacific Council meetings, and felt honored by the suggestion that I go to the United States as guest lecturer at the University of California in Berkeley. It was my hope that I could use this post to get a better feel of the American mood and at the same time explain Japanese thinking to the American public. We planned to help defray expenses with contributions from interested Japanese, but the University Board of Trustees said they did not have any room in their budget for me. As a result, I put my fallback plan into action and went to work for Domei News Agency.

Q: *You became Shanghai Bureau Chief in late 1932 and stayed in that post through 1938. This must have afforded you an unusual opportunity to observe the disintegration of Japan-China relations firsthand.*

A: The Sino-Japanese War was sparked by the Marco Polo Bridge Incident that occurred in north China in July 1937. I hoped that this would be an isolated incident, but the Japanese government belief that China could be beaten into subservience only heightened Chinese animosity. After this there followed a strange period during which China and Japan kept negotiating for peace even as they waged a fierce war. However, it was too late to quell the flames of the war. Japan got involved in the European war in 1940 and launched the Pacific War in December 1941.

Q: *From October 1939, you were a close observer of events as Domei editor-in-chief, and I know you also had the chance to be a participant. What about that?*

A: Prime Minister Fumimaro Konoe asked me to be Ambassador to the United States, but I was not in a position to accept. I had commitments at Domei that I had to keep. Personally, I felt that the only way to improve Japan-U.S. relations was for the Japanese military to withdraw from China. Prime Minister Konoe was trying hard to end the Sino-Japanese War and to improve relations with the United States, but these negotiations floundered after Hideki Tojo became prime minister in October 1941. And by December 1941, of course, we were at war.

Q: *You had another opportunity some years later when Konoe asked you to accompany him on a peace mission to the Soviet Union.*

A: In May 1945, the Supreme Council for the Direction of the War decided to ask the Soviet Union to intercede with

the Allied Powers on Japan's behalf. Shortly afterward, news came in that Truman, Churchill and Stalin were going to have a summit meeting in Potsdam. Since time was obviously of the essence, Konoe was appointed to head a special mission to Moscow.

At the time, I was in Karuizawa recuperating from a bout of typhoid fever, but Konoe came and told me that the Emperor had asked him to go to Moscow to negotiate for peace and that he wanted me to go with him. We had no idea how the Soviet Union would react, but I agreed to go along even though I was still quite ill. As it turned out, however, it was already too late.

Truman, Churchill and Stalin held their Potsdam Conference on July 17, and the Potsdam Declaration was issued on July 26. Less than two weeks later, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, the Soviet Union entered the war on August 8, and another atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki on August 9. Japan had no choice but to accept the Potsdam Declaration and its terms for unconditional surrender.

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International House would not exist today had it not been for J.D. Rockefeller III.

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Q: *I can imagine your ever-mounting frustration and despair throughout the long years of war, and I'm not surprised that you supported your old friend Shigeru Yoshida's efforts to get Japan back on its feet again after the war. Your endeavors around this time led to one of your major postwar accomplishments, the founding of the International House of Japan.*

A: The International House would not exist today had it not been for John Rockefeller III. I had met Rockefeller in Kyoto in 1929, but subsequent events kept us apart for many years. In 1951, Rockefeller came to Japan with the Dulles mission to make arrangements for the San Francisco Peace Treaty.

This was a time of reversal in American occupation policy as the emphasis moved away from democratization and demilitarization and the priority was put on integrating Japan into the Western alliance, and there was a sense of betrayal among Japanese opinion leaders. Rockefeller was convinced that cultural exchange was the best way to heal the rift between our two countries. When I talked with him about this, I told him that

the immediate imperative was to send some of America's leading thinkers and scholars to Japan, since I thought that talking with these people could mitigate a lot of the negative feelings about the United States.

Soon a committee had been set up and a fund drive launched to attract contributions not only from business but from the general public. We were very successful, collecting a total of ¥100 million from thousands of individual and institutional donors. To give you an idea how much ¥100 million was then, the prime minister's monthly salary was only ¥110,000 a month. The Rockefeller Foundation added another ¥400 million, and in 1951 we purchased the International House's present site at Roppongi, Tokyo, from the government and built the facilities. Today, we have over 4,000 members and draw support from over 40 countries worldwide.

American frustration has reached the boiling point.

Q: *Since opening in the summer of 1955, International House has invited a wide variety of people from many different countries to Japan and been a stimulus to the international flow of ideas. In the process, you have gained a unique perspective on international relations, including Japan's relations with the United States. Today, those relations are threatened by increasingly acrimonious trade friction. I wonder if there is a solution to this vexing problem.*

A: I don't really have a pat answer. According to former Ambassador to the United States Yoshio Okawara, over the past decade America has seen Japan repeatedly fail to live up to what the American side thought were firm promises, and American frustration has reached the boiling point. Much of this is emotional, and I doubt if there's anything the Japanese government can do to alleviate tensions so long as the United States continues to run these massive trade deficits with Japan.

When Japanese-American relations began to disintegrate 60-70 years ago, labor leaders who thought the Japanese immigrants worked too hard were in the forefront of the anti-Japanese movement while the American Congress tried to stem the hysteria. This time Congress is on the opposite side of the fence. American consumers appreciate the availability of low-cost, high-quality imports from Japan—many people flatly refusing, for

example, to buy an American-built car. Yet Congress is trying to pass blatantly anti-Japanese trade legislation. This sort of thing would have been unimaginable before.

The Americans know that the trade imbalance is basically not Japan's fault, but that's not an emotionally satisfying answer. There is a lot of pent-up frustration. It is conceivable that Japan could appease the United States with massive arms purchases, but we don't have the money to throw away like that.

One aspect of the problem is that Japan has become too powerful. I don't think Japan's nearly as strong as many people think, but it is the perception that counts. "After all we did for you after the war," the American people seem to be saying, "this is how you repay us." Japan should do everything it can to rectify the situation, including meeting the new responsibilities commensurate with our economic strength and articulating our side of the story.

Japan has grown into an economic giant, but we didn't do this all by ourselves. True, the bulk of the credit has to go to the Japanese people for applying their talents so diligently, but a goodly portion is also due the United States for opening its markets and buying Japanese products.

Q: *Do you agree that Japan has not kept its promises to the United States?*

A: We eventually end up doing what the United States wants, but it takes a long time. For example, Americans don't see why they should have to wait one, two or three years for Japan to open its markets. Mike Mansfield is one of the best ambassadors the United States has ever had, yet not even he has been able to improve relations between our two countries. The whole thing looks hopeless, but we can't afford to sit back and let events run their course. We have to stem this dangerous tide and find a way to get through this critical period safely.

Q: *What do you suggest?*

A: We need to talk to each other more. Good people have to be sent to—and invited from—the United States to get to know each other and personalize the relationship.

Q: *How do current American attitudes toward Japan compare to the angry anti-Japanese sentiment that was prevalent in California and other parts of the United States when you were a student there 60 years ago?*

A: I think the American people basically trust Japan. Until recently we were far less trusted than, say, Germany, but that distrust has faded. Back before the

war, Japanese products were cheap in the sense of shoddy, but today they're inexpensive in the sense of being well worth what they cost. That's what has really changed attitudes—that Japan was able to make such good use of the technology learned during the Occupation years.

Q: *If American consumers appreciate Japanese products and even have a certain respect for Japan for being able to produce these products, why is Congress talking up such a protectionist storm? What does this say about American democracy and the ideal of representative government?*

A: There are times when Congress seems to be out of touch with its constituents. This is, however, something that can happen to leaders everywhere.

Back in the 1930s, the military dominated Japanese politics, leading Japan into a no-win war in China and then against the United States. Since then, we've moved from postwar devastation to being a major economic power. If nothing else, history should have taught us the importance of maintaining good relations with the United States and China—and of at least avoiding hostility with the Soviet Union.

Now that Japan has won broad acceptance as an important member of the international community, we could make a major contribution to world peace by working harder for good relations with the United States, China and the Soviet Union; and perhaps finding some way to bring all four of our nations closer together.

Reality is the only option we have.

Q: *We are so accustomed to thinking of Japan as a poor country with no voice in international affairs that we don't yet understand how to behave as the powerful nation that we are or how to interact with other nations.*

A: That is something we will all have to work out together. The most important thing is for the Japanese people, particularly Japanese opinion leaders, to take a long, hard look at where Japan stands in the world today and to be able to explain this both at home and abroad. Japan hasn't had to explain itself for 2,000 years, but all that is over now. We're a full-fledged member of the international community now with all of the responsibilities that entails for keeping things running smoothly and for doing what we can to help the developing countries. It won't be easy, but reality is the only option we have. ●