

Japanese Democracy and the American Occupation

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The most large-scale, concentrated, and dramatic attempt to export democracy to another culture was during the U.S. Occupation of Japan, 1945–52. This experiment is generally regarded as a success, and with good reason. Today secular political authority, popular sovereignty, parliamentary government, civilian control of the military, and other principles important to democracy have to a large extent become the operating principles of Japanese politics. Certainly there is no Japanese democrat, however critical of the present shape and direction of the government, who would prefer to go back to 1944.

But whether the present system of government is preferable to the previous one is a different question from whether it is a “democracy.” There are several considerations here. First, the principles brought by the American Occupation forces were not the universal principles of democracy, but the principles of democracy as understood by Americans in a specific historical period, that of the transition from the New Deal to the cold war. The Occupation proclaimed contradictory notions, and these have remained at the center of Japanese politics ever since.

Moreover, even when the Occupation authorities were being consistent, the message sent was not always the same as the message received. This is because of the difference in culture, but also because of the difference in historical situation. The Occupation was not a conversation between equals. America had won the war, Japan had been defeated. The perspective from which ordinary Japanese people viewed their conquerors was entirely different from the way the conquerors viewed themselves. And that difference applied also to the ideas the Americans brought: to the Japanese people, these were principles imported by conquerors.

Finally, the “success” of the Occupation takes on a somewhat different light

if one includes Korea in the discussion. Prior to the end of the war, Korea had been a part of Japan for thirty-five years, though never on an equal basis. It was the victorious allies who gave Korea its independence, and a true evaluation of the effect of postwar U.S. policy in the area cannot be made without taking into consideration the political situations of both Japan and Korea.

On August 30, 1945, General Douglas MacArthur, commander in chief of the Allied military forces, arrived in Japan with his characteristic confidence. Aerial photographs had assured him that his landing would not be resisted. This fact had made him magnanimous.

MacArthur was a conservative who had first made a name for himself by crushing the Bonus Marchers in Washington, D.C. in the summer of 1932, the last year of the Hoover administration. By an irony of history, the staff officers who arrived in Japan with him were men of the New Deal generation. MacArthur had a soldierly affection for these staff officers, who had fought with him in the Philippines. Their New Deal faith in the ability of a government to plan the economy and life-style of a society fit well with the task of drawing a blueprint to remodel Japan—a job that MacArthur, in a generous mood, was prepared to enjoy.

The overall result was a kind of historical time lag between domestic U.S. politics and the politics of the Occupation in its initial stage. For the spirit of that initial stage—which lasted roughly until the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950—was the spirit of the earliest period of the New Deal reincarnated in an even more purified state than had existed in Washington in 1933.

Right from the beginning, however, there were two opposing factions among MacArthur's staff officers. Opposing the liberal group was the chief of the G-II section, General Charles A. Willoughby. Under the cover of his intelligence and counterespionage activities, Willoughby maintained contact with former officials of the Japanese Special Thought Police. The information he received, with its extreme anticommunist bias, seemed plausible given Willoughby's own political views. At the same time, he also gathered information on other Occupation officials whose activities seemed undesirable to him, and forwarded it both to MacArthur and to the House Committee on Un-American Activities. This information was used to get a number of the New Dealers replaced. A particular object of Willoughby's enmity was Colonel Charles L. Kades, who had served under Secretary of the Interior Ickes in the Roosevelt cabinet. Kades had worked on the original draft of the war-renouncing constitution, on land reform, on the breaking up of the *zaibatsu*, and on the purge of war leaders. Willoughby managed to force him out of Japan by publicizing his relationship with the Vicountess Torio Tsuruyo.

But the Occupation began in a spirit of high optimism, an optimism under-

standable if one considers that it combined the reforming zeal of the New Deal with the absolute power of military conquest. In the later stages of the Occupation, "democracy" was redefined as anticommunism, and what came to be known as the Reverse Course phase began, as the U.S. and Japanese governments entered a long period of cooperation in systematically undermining and overturning the principal Occupation reforms. All of this took place in the context of an American attitude of paternalism, an attitude whose content was most clearly revealed by MacArthur's description of the Japanese people to the U.S. Congress in 1951 as having the mentality of twelve-year-old children. Then the Japanese people could see not only the contempt but also the ignorance with which they were regarded by their conquerors.

For the ordinary Japanese the situation was not so romantic as it was for the Americans. With the exception of Kyoto, every major city had been burned almost completely. In Tokyo, we could stand in the street and see the horizon in all directions. Many people were living in holes in the ground, in sewer pipes and air-raid shelters. At the last stage of the war a novelist who had been recruited for compulsory labor service, and who found himself carrying earth in a crude straw basket, observed that Japanese life seemed to have returned to its most ancient, mythic period.

For most people the problem was finding food. What life was like then was symbolized by one of the most advertised events of the period, the arrest of a man named Kodaira Yoshio. Kodaira would approach a young woman in the ticket queue at a railroad station, and tell her that he had found a reliable source of food in the countryside and that he would take her there. Since the telephone system was out of operation then, the woman would follow him to the country without contacting her home. All told, Kodaira had raped and murdered seven women between June and December, 1945. He had acquired his taste for rape-murder in the war in China in 1927-28, where he had been decorated for bravery.

Next to the problem of food, other problems seemed trivial. To the Japanese, the Occupation made its most durable impression as a provider of food. Tons of food—flour, corn, powdered milk—were released by the Americans. The impression left by this food—and for those who were children then, the even deeper impression of chocolate and chewing gum, which the Americans also provided—formed the basis of the friendliness that was generated by the seven years of occupation.

One of the first acts of the Occupation was to order all references to the militarist ideology expunged from the textbooks, and schoolchildren were set to work painting black ink over the offensive pages that only recently they had been busily studying. At the same time, from December 9, 1945, the national radio station, under orders from General Headquarters (GHQ), began a series called "This is True," which was supposed to reveal the facts of the war. It gave the im-

In the earliest phase of the Occupation, before the turning point on February 1, 1948, when MacArthur banned the General Strike being planned under the leadership of the Japan Communist Party, major reforms were undertaken to eliminate what was believed to be the remnants of feudalism. War criminals were put on trial; leaders were purged; the thought police and the Public Order Maintenance Law were abolished; political prisoners were released; *zaibatsu* economic groups were broken up; land reform was enacted; the emperor announced that he was a human being; a new constitution was drafted giving women the right to vote and renouncing the right of war; and the school system was remodeled. These reforms had varying effects. The dissolution of the *zaibatsu* was never fully carried out, and all of them quickly returned to power. The land reform, on the other hand, had an enormous effect in reshaping the Japanese mentality: it gave the farmers, for the first time, the mentality of property owners, and made them the staunch supporters of the conservative party that they are today. The purge originally had the clear purpose of removing all militarist and ultranationalist leaders from responsible positions in government, industry, and mass communication; but its logic crumbled when its criteria were interpreted as justifying the removal of Communist party members and sympathizers. In June 1950 all members of the Japan Communist Party were purged from public office, and between 1949 and 1951 more than twenty thousand suspected Communists lost their jobs, most of them permanently.

As late as June 1948, General Courtney Whitney of the government section stated that the purged leaders should stay purged for life and that the Occupation authorities would hold the Japanese government responsible for this. This statement was in accordance with the Potsdam Declaration, but it was revoked within a year. Even while the Occupation continued, depurging began, and when the Occupation ended, the purge was lifted. Within a few years the old political forces had gathered together and, now with the support of the United States, were able to reinstate wartime leaders into power. Kishi Nobusuke, who was appointed premier in 1957, and who even today wields great power behind the scenes, was a depurged Class A War Criminal and a member of the Tojo cabinet.

Opposition groups displayed a similar ambiguity. For example, the Communist party had also published its own list of war criminals, which contained some 1,600 names. In general, it was a list of those who had not come back to the party line after the defeat. Borrowing a term from logic, we may say that the classification of "war criminal" was quasi-heterological. That is, while a homological term names a category in which the term itself is included ("English" is an English word, "noun" is a noun), a heterological term is not self-referential. In postwar Japan, the term *war criminal* was typically applied to a member of a group to which the accuser did not belong.

Probably the most uncontroversial achievement of the Occupation was in

the field of public health. The situation immediately after the war was one in which epidemics were highly likely, and the Occupation's Health and Welfare Section handled the problem in a way the Japanese people could never have expected from their own government. From 1895 to 1945 the average life expectancy for a male was around 42 years; for a female, 51 years. Between 1946 and 1951 this figure leaped to 61 years for males and 64.8 years for females.

The most direct attempt of the Allies to teach the Japanese people their sense of justice was through the trials of war criminals. The Tokyo War Crimes Trial—formally named the International Military Tribunal for the Far East—was set up by General MacArthur in accordance with the Potsdam Declaration. It was a trial of twenty-eight wartime leaders by eleven Allied nations. The trials lasted for more than two years, and the prosecution and defense gathered voluminous documentation. A total of 4,336 exhibits were admitted as evidence, 419 persons testified in court, and 779 testified by deposition. The court transcripts amount to 48,412 pages gathered into 113 volumes.

Not much of this information reached the ears of the Japanese people. At the time of the trials many people's radios had burned up with their houses, and the newspapers were printed on a single sheet of paper, half the size of the present ones. Nevertheless, mainly by word of mouth, the Japanese people gleaned a sense of the fifteen years' war. They learned for the first time of the Rape of Nanking and other atrocities. They learned that Joseph B. Keenan, the chief prosecutor, had accused the former leaders "in the name of civilization." They learned that the emperor was never called to account. Those items are what remain in their memory.

As has often been noted, the War Crimes Trials, in seeking to establish a new category of war crime that would include conspiracy to carry out a war of invasion, inevitably entailed the element of retroaction, labeling acts as "criminal" that had not been established as criminal at the time of their commission. This necessity that the trial jump over its own illegality, combined with the fact that it was conducted by the conquerors, left most Japanese people with the impression that the trial was a modern legal façade for a primitive form of retaliation, which had to be accepted as a physical necessity.

Moreover, though the prosecutors said that the preservation of law was the primary purpose and that punishment of criminals was only secondary, this was not convincing. The sparing of the emperor, though a relief to most people, denied the logic of the trials: throughout the war it had been axiomatic that all orders came from the emperor. When the war leaders denied their responsibility it was not a subterfuge but a subjective truth. And of course everyone knew that the conquerors had spared the emperor for political reasons. The public was left with the clear impression that the accused, in particular the seven war leaders, had been chosen at random and had died as scapegoats—scapegoats for the larger

number of responsible leaders, or for the emperor, or for the Japanese people as a whole.

The same impression extends to the other war crimes trials that were conducted simultaneously in other parts of Japan, and in the USSR, China, the Dutch East Indies, Burma, North Borneo, Hong Kong, Australia, French Indochina, and Guam. In most cases the quality of the language interpretation provided by the court was poor, and many were sentenced to death without any clear idea of what they had been charged with. Tarumoto Shigeharu, who was sentenced to life imprisonment in Singapore and later returned to Japan, told of the case of Navy Petty Officer Kaneko, who was informed by the judge that though he was innocent of the crime for which he had been charged, he was to be sentenced to death for a crime for which he had not been charged. Tarumoto also told of cases in which witnesses identified the accused by the number plate that had been placed on their chests by the prosecution. There were no doubt many such cases, but we do not know how many, because the documents were carried away to the respective countries of the Occupation. But 30 percent of the trial records remain in Japan with the Correction Bureau of the Department of Justice, and these contain many instances of unfair trials. Of course, there is no denying that terrible crimes were carried out by members of the Japanese military, but the question here is what relation was established between those crimes and the persons imprisoned and executed—i.e., the question of justice.

Of the approximately 10,000 Japanese who were arrested as war criminals, 1,068 were sentenced to death, 422 were sentenced to life imprisonment, and 2,763 were given imprisonment for a lesser term. Many of those who were executed wrote last testaments, and in 1953, a total of 701 of those were published in a volume entitled *Last Testaments of the Century*. The letters express the following attitudes of these men toward their own deaths: acceptance of execution for the sake of the state (62.6 percent); continued belief in the war aims of Japan (12.3 percent); salvation in religion (11.4 percent); resentment against the trials (7.6 percent); denial of all war (3.4 percent); other (2.7 percent). This classification, which I made based on the dominant tone of the testaments, is not the only possible one. For example, sociologist Sakuda Keiichi analyzed the same letters and found four attitudes toward death, in order of predominance: (1) death as a sacrifice; (2) death as the achievement of solidarity with the dead; (3) death as atonement for one's sins; (4) natural death. Those who saw their death as a sacrifice were in effect seeing it as an incident in the war. Those who saw it as the achievement of solidarity with the dead were following the tradition of ancestor worship that is at the basis of Japanese religious consciousness.

In sum, the trials seldom met with fierce resentment even from the victims. This does not mean, however, that the criterion of justice of which they were supposed to be the expression was fully accepted. Rather, the trials were accepted as

some kind of physical calamity that had to be endured.

Japanese reactions to the trials received almost no systematic expression at the time. Opinion leaders tended to follow either U.S. or Soviet influence. In the whole proceedings the only public expression of a differing view was that of the Indian member of the Tribunal, Radharinod B. Pal. Pal wrote a lengthy dissenting opinion in which he questioned the legitimacy of a tribunal conducted only by the victors; pointed out the ambiguity in the definition of war crimes; argued that the prosecution had failed to present evidence proving a conspiracy between the Japanese, the Germans, and the Italians to achieve world domination; and compared Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb to Hitler's policy of genocide. Pal was the only one of the Tokyo Trial judges to represent the viewpoint of the Third World on the Pacific War, free from the influence of the Western imperialist powers. The Japanese, who were living in the conditions of the Third World, might have welcomed Pal's opinion if they had been able to think out the problem at the time. But newspapers and magazines gave it very little attention.

Though the Constitution has taken root among the Japanese people, in the years since the war (during which time they had to defend it against U.S. efforts to undermine the antiwar clause) the War Crimes trials have faded somewhat from memory. Japan's former prosecutor has fought two wars in Asia since then; U.S. ambassadors to Japan have made it a custom never to mention the trials in any public statement. The trials have come to be felt as a sort of moral debt to Japan by the U.S. government, which since 1950 has consistently urged Japan's war leaders to play a more dominant role in Japanese and Asian politics. And on the site of former Sugamo Prison, where the seven condemned in the Tokyo Trials were hanged, stands fashionable Sunshine Sixty, Asia's tallest building, financed by millionaire rightist Sasagawa Ryoichi, who had once been imprisoned there by the Occupation.

A certain number of literary works have been written on the subject of the trials, such as Shiroyama Saburo's *The Sunset Aglow* (1976)¹ and Takeda Taijun's *Luminous Moss* (1954).² Particularly important is Kinoshita Junji's *Between God and Man* (1972).³ This play is composed of two parts, the first a collage of the proceedings of the Tokyo War Crimes Trial, based on the actual records; the second a fictional account of the conviction and execution of a private in a war-crimes trial on a South Pacific Island.

1 Trans. John Bester as *War Criminal: The Life and Death of Hirota Koki* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1980).

2 Trans. Shibuya Yusaburo and Sanford Goldstein as *The Outcast Generation and Luminous Moss* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1967).

3 Trans. Eric J. Gangloff (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1979).

In the first part the prosecutor condemns the war criminals with the vehemence of one who has brought about unconditional surrender and with the full confidence of one who has already achieved civilization passing judgment on those who have not. There are then three sequences, in the first of which the defense's challenges to the legal bases of the trial are swept away in a flood of indignation. In the second sequence, it turns out that the massacre and dumping into a mass grave of seventy persons in Vietnam counts as a war crime if they are Vichy French but not if they are Vietnamese of the Liberation Army. In the third sequence, the question of the atomic bomb is raised and the universalistic pose of the lawyers is exposed by a nationalistic squabble between the Russian and American lawyers.

In the second half of the play the wife, the ex-lover, and the former fellow-prisoners of one Private Kanohara gather in a park in Tokyo after the war and gradually piece together the story of what had happened to him. Kanohara had been condemned by mistake—or rather through the efforts of his superior officer to cover up his own activities. Kanohara tried hard to defend himself. But he could not forget a scene he had witnessed in which a native woman he knew, whose husband had been falsely accused and executed as a spy by the Japanese army, climbed a tree and threw herself to her death in front of her young son. This had happened. Someone had to atone for it. Kanohara says,

To be hanged—to be hanged. As far as they're concerned, anyone will do, just so long as there is a criminal. But their logic applies to us as well. Besides—I didn't do anything personally, but I don't have any proof that I was totally innocent either, when I was in a situation where something had to be done. Isn't that so? Isn't that so? Isn't that so? To be hanged—to be hanged. That, however, I prefer to think of as a personally selected means of committing suicide—a means of suicide chosen by my own initiative.

And later his spirit says,

You know the place on the side of the stone where the date of death is carved? I want the date and the place where I died in battle carved there.

At the end, the private's old lover, who is a vaudeville comedienne (*manzai*) gives a performance on the street in which she juxtaposes the last poem of General Tojo to the last words of an ordinary soldier. Tojo had entrusted to his priest a thirty-syllable poem, according to the customs of a warrior.

After tomorrow
Who is there
to fear?

In the Buddha's lap
I shall sleep peacefully.

The other poem—which Kinoshita selected from among the 701 published letters of executed war criminals, referred to earlier—had been uttered by a sergeant as he crossed a small river on the way to his execution.

Where
does it flow to?
This tiny river.

Tojo died courageously, convinced of his righteousness, blind to the last, never acknowledging the misfortunes he had brought upon millions of Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, Burmese, Japanese, Europeans, and Americans. Kanohara—as expressed in the latter poem—dies to atone for the misdeeds of his fellow countrymen, though he is not sure how the mistake occurred and how his atonement will bear fruit. Though his feelings may seem trivial alongside either the ringing words of the prosecutor or Tojo's brave response, they are true to the Japanese religious tradition of little people, a tradition that has not assimilated the ideology of universal justice expressed by Tojo and the prosecutors. If we disregard this tradition we will not have a politics built on the spontaneous beliefs of the people.

In the town of Nakanojo, in Gunma Prefecture, there is an organization of purged military leaders called Azume (“East”) Society, formed in 1952 at the termination of the Occupation. The men talk about their memories of the war and the hard days under the purge. In 1961 (just at the beginning of postwar prosperity) they put up a stone monument, two meters high and one meter wide, on the face of which was engraved, “The Monument of the Stupid”—a truthful expression of the sentiment of these local subleaders who cooperated in the fifteen years' war.

There is an ambiguity in the symbol of stupidity that binds the men together, and it cannot be clarified by interviews. Are they ashamed of the stupidity, or are they proud of it? Our living thought cannot be clarified of such ambiguity and replaced by propositions of exact meaning. With the ambiguity remaining, the symbol bears the belief that the war crimes trials and purge conducted during the occupation was a random selection, bringing down the innocent with the guilty. It expresses distrust of the government of Japan, of the United States, and of government in general.

In 1952 the Occupation was over. It was the middle of the Korean War, and the United States was giving its full support to the return of Japan's old war-time leaders to politics, business, and defense. U.S. military procurements poured

money into the economy, producing the "takeoff" that brought Japan a prosperity undreamed of at the time of the surrender. Japan pulled itself out of the conditions of the Third World, leaving Okinawa behind; there those islands remain, with their vital areas still under de facto occupation in the form of U.S. military bases. Today Okinawa is the only direct link between the Japanese and the Third World.

Japan's economic success and also its relative success as a democracy are intimately related to the series of events that led to the division of Korea and the series of dictatorships that have plagued that country. To the extent that Japan's postwar political condition can be attributed to U.S. policy in Asia, so can that of Korea, at least in the South. U.S. occupation forces in Korea, unlike those in Japan, of course lacked the New Deal reformist element; it was pure "Reverse Course" anticommunism from the beginning. It is often forgotten that Syngman Rhee was flown into Korea, to set up a separate anticommunist government in the South, in MacArthur's private plane while MacArthur was Supreme Commander Allied Powers in Japan; it was under the same title that MacArthur commanded the U.S. military at the beginning of the Korean War.

This is not the place to document all the intimate, largely hidden ways in which the United States, Japan, and Korea have been intertwined since the war. It is perhaps sufficient to remind the reader that Korea had been "occupied" by Japan since 1910, had been bitterly exploited, and subjected, as second-class citizens, to a forced assimilation policy. This connection was severed by Japan's defeat, but the cold war made short work of Korean independence. U.S. policy in the area sought to make South Korea a bastion of anticommunism, and Japan, one step removed from the Iron Curtain, a showcase of democracy and "modernization." At the same time all sorts of old Japan-Korea connections, especially right-wing-gangster-militarist connections, reemerged. Former South Korean dictator Park Chung Hee, for instance, had been an officer in the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II, with the Japanese name of Okamoto Minoru.⁴

But at a deeper level these two "occupations"—that of Japan by the United States and that of Korea by Japan—may shed light on one another. The intense exploitation of and deep prejudice toward Koreans by Japanese is well known. But this relationship between the two peoples is a modern one. During the Tokugawa period, the Korean delegation to Japan was received with courtesy and veneration. Toward the end of that period, there were some years of no cultural

⁴ It should also not be forgotten that the present South Korean dictator Chun Doo Hwan was trained at Fort Black, North Carolina, and Fort Benning, Georgia, and that he got his military experience as a regimental commander in Vietnam, where General Wickham, the present U.S. commander in South Korea, had been one of his superior officers.

contact between the two countries, and hence of emotional neutrality. It was after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, when the passion for "civilization" (Westernization, actually) took possession of the Japanese government, that they began to look down on Koreans as less "civilized." The Western image of the "ladder of civilization" seized the imagination of the Japanese, and both leftists and rightists began drawing up plots and plans for forcing so-called civilization on Korea. The final result was the annexation of 1910 and the subsequent assimilation policy whereby Koreans were forced to bow to the emperor, learn Japanese, and take Japanese names. But of course this should not be surprising. The idea of the "ladder of civilization" had originally been developed in Europe as an idea to legitimize colonialism.

At the end of the war there were two million Koreans in Japan, three-quarters of whom had been brought as forced laborers during the war. The Occupation had virtually no policy for these people except to repatriate them, leaving the details to the Japanese government; thus they were treated much as they had been before. Many returned, but after the country was divided into North and South going back became more difficult and, for some, impossible. Another factor was that the Japanese government allowed them to take out only one thousand yen, which meant that those who had managed to accumulate any wealth had to leave it all behind. Today about 600,000 Koreans remain in Japan, most of the second and third generation, yet still not Japanese citizens. Discrimination against these Koreans is, if anything, growing more intense.

An attitude of discrimination can also be found even among Japanese democrats critical of the South Korean dictatorship. All too often the response to such news as the Kwangju massacre, or the plight of Kim Dae Jung, or some new oppressive law, is an attitude of pity mixed with contempt for a people still one step down on the ladder of democracy. But in Korea as well as in Japan, a politics that does not begin with a basic respect for the spontaneous thoughts and feelings of the people cannot be democratic.

We cannot say that these attitudes were created by the Occupation, but certainly they were given ample support. In the end, the United States had treated defeated Japan with much more care and consideration than liberated Korea. What explanation can there be, other than that the United States made a judgment of the relative levels of civilization of the two peoples? Whatever the cause, the Japanese attitudes of respect for American life and contempt for Korean life are two aspects of a single way of thinking. The contradiction that lies at the basis of the idea of "exporting democracy" was not solved by the Occupation, and it has not been solved yet.

Yet there are indications that the image of the "ladder of civilization"—in fundamental contradiction to true democracy—is fading. Japan fought the fifteen years' war with this image clearly in mind. The result of the war and the Oc-

cupation changed the notion of who was at the top, and also began to weaken the image itself. Probably the most important seed of doubt was planted by the war-crimes trials. A further source of disenchantment has been the rapid economic development that has caused Japan to overtake the West in some areas. All this may generate a framework within which it will be possible for the Japanese people to develop a new conception of democracy that would involve, this time, both Japanese and Koreans.

For Korea, along with the other countries at the fringes of Western power, cannot be ignored in the struggle for democracy. On the contrary, South Korea today should be regarded as one of its world centers. We know now that the attempt to support a prosperous democracy at the center with military dictatorships at the fringe cannot succeed. The center will soon come to resemble the regimes it has created and supported. This does not mean that the Japanese should follow the Occupation and seek to "export" democracy to Korea. On the contrary, it means that we must recognize that today it is the people of South Korea who are at the vanguard of the worldwide democratic movement. Should they succeed, then perhaps the spirit of their fresh, new democracy can be exported back to reinvigorate the tarnished democracies at the power centers of the United States and Japan.