

Pearl Harbour and the Unification of Japan: a New Perspective on the Attack of Pearl Harbour through a Japanese Pan-Asianist Lens

Sakiko Noda

On December 7th (8th in Japan) 1941, Japan, without provocation, bombed Hawai'i's Pearl Harbour, effectively imposing war on the United States. Since this event, much of the world at large has questioned why Japan would wage war with such a powerful nation without any chance of victory. This paper offers an alternative perspective on the popular history of the events of Pearl Harbour by examining former relations between Japan and the U.S., and how those relations impacted Japan's motives behind the attack. Japan's strike on the West was fueled by the objective of Pan-Asianism, an ideology which was paramount in Japan's ongoing search for identity and its feelings of obligation in protecting other Asian countries from the perceived harm of the West. With this understanding, Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour, however misguided, may be regarded as an attempt to attain a sense of identity and unity.

The notion of identity and unification has been a prominent and continuous struggle for Japan since the arrival of American naval captain Matthew Perry in 1854. Japan has since grappled with the idea of what it means to be Asian, and specifically, what it means to be Japanese. The creation of Pan-Asianism allowed Japan to find a sense of self as well as commonality with other Asian countries in a world they saw as overrun by Westernization, modernization, and racism. The evolution of Pan-Asianism created the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, an alternative regional identity which worked to liberate Asia from Western powers and influences. It is through this Pan-Asianist lens that Japan's quest for unity and identity becomes comprehensible and helps makes sense of Japan's devastating, yet widely glorified, bombing of Pearl Harbour.

Pan-Asianism can be understood as a fusion of Asian countries linked through a spiritual, cultural, or political commonality which join forces and resources to liberate Asia from Western influence and infiltration. In her article "'The War of 'World Historical Significance' Pan-Asianism and Japan's War," Eri Hotta describes three main variations of Pan-Asianism. The first model is "Teaist," which is considered the mildest, least political form of Pan-Asianism.²⁷² Teaist refers to *The Book of Tea* by author Okakura Tenshin which focuses on Asian connection through aesthetics and culture.²⁷³ The key idea is

²⁷² Christopher Goto-Jones, "Pan-Asianism," History 365: Overcoming Modernity in Japan (Class lecture via Zoom, 25 October 2021).

²⁷³ Goto-Jones, "Pan-Asianism."

centred around a core, generic Asian aesthetic, smell, or taste, that can be found throughout Asia, allowing Asians to continuously feel at home regardless of where they are within the continent. The second category of Pan-Asianism is “Sinic,” which is based on the vision of a connected Asia stemming from the expansion of Chinese culture.²⁷⁴ This model is thought to be a relatively equal alliance between Asian nations unified by a common culture, although it did involve aspects of imperialism.²⁷⁵ The final model of Pan-Asianism is known as “Meishu,” roughly translating to “leader” in Japanese, and is the most chauvinistic of the three models.²⁷⁶ Through the Meishu model, Japan’s leaders believed there was an imbalance in the Asian countries with regards to civilization, modernity, and power. They also concluded that it was their duty to lead Asia in the quest to purge Western domination and influence, through a paternalistic Japanese Pan-Asianist frame.

The Meishu model has since become the most prominent form of Pan-Asianism. By the 1930s, Pan-Asianism was beginning to gradually increase in popularity amongst high-ranking members of Japanese society. This is likely an effect of the 1931 Manchurian Incident (which further led to various Sino-Japanese conflicts) and Japan’s withdrawal from the League of Nations (LON) in 1933 where they announced their intentions to “follow [their] own path in Asia.”²⁷⁷ Japan had felt misled as it had played a large role in the LON, yet they were being condemned for their occupation of Manchuria, which had given Japan the impression that the LON was a “regional rather than a universal organization.”²⁷⁸ This justified Japan’s beliefs that Western powers were inherently racist towards Japan and Asia as a whole, which led to increased isolation of Japan, and an expansion of Pan-Asianist thinkers.²⁷⁹ The exclusion and racism Japan faced from international powers helped pave the way for Pan-Asianism, and allowed it to foster a sense of regional identity for Japan. This newfound sense of purpose led Japan to believe they would be an apt representative and leader for the united nation of Asia. In 1933, the Greater Asia Association (Dai Ajia Kyōkai) was established. Its membership included prominent figures such as Army General Ishiwara Kanji and future Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro.²⁸⁰ The association promoted a unification of Asia and advocated for solidarity throughout Asian societies.²⁸¹ Pan-Asianism was also growing within intellectual spheres that had no previous connection to “conservative radical nationalist groups.”²⁸² Leading

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Goto-Jones, "Pan-Asianism."

²⁷⁷ Christopher Goto-Jones, “Overcoming and overcome by modernity: Japan at War,” In *Modern Japan: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 78.

²⁷⁸ Goto-Jones, “Overcoming and overcome by modernity,” 78.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Cemil Aydin, "Japan's Pan-Asianism and the Legitimacy of Imperial World Order, 1931-1945," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 6, no. 3 (March 03, 2008), 14.

²⁸¹ Aydin, “Japan’s Pan-Asianism,” 14.

²⁸² Ibid, 3.

scholars such as members of the Kyoto School of Philosophy contributed to the acceptance of Pan-Asianism by contributing their theories on overcoming modernity and Eurocentrism, and by seeking alternative avenues for Japanese and Asian cultural traditions to incorporate modernity.²⁸³ The progression of Pan-Asianism continued following the formation of the British Commonwealth and the League of Nations. It seemed as though the world was splitting into regional blocs as opposed to individual countries, and Japan wanted to lead the Asian bloc.

In 1938, the New Order was introduced to Japan in a speech made by Prime Minister Konoe. This strategy was established as a way for Japan to rationalize its wars in other Asian countries by claiming Japan was responsible for upholding ethical and moral responsibilities for the people of Asia. Through this, Chris Goto-Jones explains in his chapter “Overcoming and overcome by modernity: Japan at war,” that as its confidence grew, Japan slipped into an “aggressive sense of mission,” leading the country to think it had an obligation to rescue other Asian nations from succumbing to modernity and Westernization.²⁸⁴ This led to Japan’s creation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (Daitōa Kyōeiken), which was first publicly announced by Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yōsuke in 1940.²⁸⁵ Included in “Greater East Asia” was Japan, Manchukuo, China, Southwest Asia, Eastern Siberia, and even the outer areas of Australia, India, and the Pacific Islands.²⁸⁶ The Japanese government’s ultimate aim of the Co-Prosperity Sphere’s was to achieve “order for co-prosperity, mutual respect for sovereign independence among Asian nations, while calling for the elimination of racial discrimination’ and ‘full freedom for Asiatics.’”²⁸⁷ The ideology behind the Co-Prosperity Sphere rests on the philosophical model of expansion through synthesis rather than conquest.²⁸⁸ Japan’s vision was to travel to Asian countries, banish any Westerners, help modernize the country, and then give said country these modernization techniques. After doing so, Japan would collect a part of the culture to contribute to the growth of the Co-Prosperity Sphere and then the process would continue through this synthetic system. Through this method, Japan would integrate itself and other Asian countries into a prosperous nation benefiting everyone in Japan’s claim to saving Asia from the West.

The reception of Pan-Asianism amongst Japan and other parts of Asia varied. Japan’s hypocrisy was criticized as it seemed to be that Japan was doing to other Asian

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Goto-Jones, “Overcoming and overcome by modernity,” 63.

²⁸⁵ Janis Mimura, “Japan’s New Order and Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: Planning for Empire,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 9, no. 49 (December 06, 2011), 1.

²⁸⁶ Mimura, “Japan’s New Order and Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” 1.

²⁸⁷ Eri Hotta, “The War of ‘World Historical Significance,’” In *Pan-Asianism and Japan’s War*, 177-198, New York: Palgrave, 2008, 186.

²⁸⁸ Christopher Goto-Jones, “Pearl Harbour,” *History 365: Overcoming Modernity in Japan* (Class lecture via Zoom, 28 October 2021).

countries what the West had done to Japan.²⁸⁹ In an attempt to justify these actions, Japan claimed it was helping these countries “as an Asian brother helps another under threat from the West.”²⁹⁰ The Asian public was confounded as Japan had expressed its desire to save and lead Asia, while at the same time, it continued to harm fellow Asian countries. Although not everyone in Japan agreed on protocols implemented under Pan-Asianism, the overarching aim of national interest and unity was enough of a common denominator to continue supporting the cause. The danger in this rhetoric is that decisions regarding policies may be based on influences from certain groups that advocate aggressive programs and who rely on their ideological commonalities to achieve their agenda.²⁹¹ This can then lead to harmful directives being passed under the guise of Pan-Asianism. The largest event to stem from Pan-Asianism was undoubtedly Japan’s bombing of Pearl Harbour in Hawai’i on 7 December 1941 (8 December in Japan). Once the notion of Pan-Asianism became a force strong enough to envelop opposing strategies and garner support from some of Japan’s highest ranking officials, in Japan’s eyes, the next logical step was to wage war with the West. The attack was considered a monstrous victory for Japan as there were 4,000 American casualties as well as two battleships, nearly 200 aircrafts, and ten other warships were destroyed.²⁹² Comparatively, Japan lost 65 men and 30 aircrafts.²⁹³ Despite the massive success of Japan’s mission, it further fueled the animosities of World War II as the attack took place before an official declaration of war had been announced.²⁹⁴

It seems to be a common question amongst scholars and even the general public as to why Japan would engage in war with such a powerful nation such as the United States. Pan-Asianism plays a critical role in Japan’s war entry and can help make sense of Japan’s reasoning behind the bombing of Pearl Harbour. Emperor Hirohito’s declaration of war several hours after the attack proclaimed the reasons for Japan’s decision to go to war with a Western power, stating

Our empire has always been about peace in Asia. Nobody seems to understand this. Our enemies seek to exploit us and Asia. We have been so patient and they have been so unreasonable. Since we are invested in the good of all, with divine purpose, we have no choice but to defend ourselves in Asia. Millennia of ancestors and nations unified by righteousness will win the day.²⁹⁵

²⁸⁹ Goto-Jones, “Overcoming and overcome by modernity,” 64.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁹¹ Hotta, “The War of ‘World Historical Significance,’” 181.

²⁹² Goto-Jones, “Overcoming and overcome by modernity,” 81.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

²⁹⁵ Goto-Jones, “Pan-Asianism.”

Japan saw the attack on Pearl Harbour as an opportunity to liberate Asia from the cruelty and oppression of the West and change the course of world history;²⁹⁶ it was a way to stand up for Asia in order to save Asia. In Japan's eyes, America was seen as "an uncultured land of bubblegum, tall buildings, and moral vacuity,"²⁹⁷ it was a monster of modernity without any cultural or spiritual backbone. Prime Minister Tōjō and the team behind Pearl Harbour had planned it to be "so devastating that the American public would lose all stomach for war with Japan and hence surrender quickly."²⁹⁸ It immediately became apparent that this was a gross miscalculation. Although the rest of the world saw Pearl Harbour as an enormous misstep, the attack was widely celebrated by the Japanese, including those who had opposed previous Japanese military excursions. To many Japanese, it felt as though Japan had finally achieved a unified sense of nation. Japan's aspirations of standing up for Asia against the West had at last manifested; words were becoming actions and promises were being fulfilled for the first time. The Japanese felt as though the course of history was changing by rejecting and punishing America, whom the Japanese viewed as the epitome of modernity and Westernization. The euphoric feeling surging through Japan following the success of Pearl Harbour has since come to be understood as the "Philosophy of December 8" (Jūnigatsu Yōka no Shisō).²⁹⁹ The "crisis of confidence" which had plagued Japan in various aspects of society for years had finally been overcome, and was replaced with a feeling of confidence and pride.³⁰⁰ Japan's Pan-Asianist war aims transcended the boundaries of class, politics, and age, obtaining support throughout the country as it "seemed to open up a new opportunity for Japan to fulfill its ambition for a world role at long last."³⁰¹

A renowned scholar, "China expert,"³⁰² and vehement opponent to Japan's military engagements in China, Takeuchi Yoshimi (1910-1977), had developed a new, enthusiastic view of Japan's war with the West. Takeuchi published a piece discussing Pearl Harbour, stating "our Japan was not afraid of the strong after all [...] It is now our determination to labor, without stint, for the true goal of creating a new order in East Asia and of liberating all nations."³⁰³ Other scholars, including members of the Kyoto Imperial University also shared the same excitement as many others in Japan. The intellectual endorsements and support among literati, including ones with a previous anti-war stance, gave credibility to Japan's proclaimed war aims.³⁰⁴ Furthermore, many intellectuals at the

²⁹⁶ Hotta, "The War of 'World Historical Significance,'" 195.

²⁹⁷ Goto-Jones, "Overcoming and overcome by modernity," 83.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ Hotta, "The War of 'World Historical Significance,'" 189.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 195.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 193.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

time believed Japan would be the “guiding light and leading force in Asia’s salvation.”³⁰⁵ The commencement of Japan’s operation in the Pacific “transformed a narrow and limited claim of Japan’s Pan-Asianist mission in China into a nation-wide euphoria and a willing endorsement of the ‘Co-Prosperity Sphere’ ideology.”³⁰⁶ Although the embracing of the Philosophy of December 8 was not universal, it seems as though there are very few people that did not share this feeling of triumph.³⁰⁷ The bombing of Pearl Harbour was a defining moment in the development of Pan-Asianism as Japan’s once purely state ideology had transcended into a national ideology.³⁰⁸ Japan’s goal to achieve a unified nation through the Co-Prosperity Sphere appeared to finally have been recognized and accepted.

In a time when encroaching Western powers plagued Japan with modernization, racism, and exclusion, Japan’s longing for a unified national identity became overwhelming. The ideology of Pan-Asianism was a way for Japan to belong to something bigger than itself, as well as a chance to be a part of a collective community. A once innocent idea transformed into the imperialized and aggressive Co-Prosperity Sphere, wherein Japan felt as though it was the most suitable candidate to liberate the Asian nation from Western infiltration. In Japan’s attempt to emancipate Asia from the West, Japan in itself became oppressive and chauvinistic towards its fellow Asian countries. The attack on Pearl Harbour became an exhilarating and monumental event for Japan. For the first time, Japan was finally taking action in their claim to protecting Asia from Western harm. It is with this knowledge that the fateful event of Pearl Harbour can be understood from a different perspective, one in the search for unity and identity.

Bibliography

- Aydin, Cemil. "Japan's Pan-Asianism and the Legitimacy of Imperial World Order, 1931-1945." *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 6, no. 3 (March 03, 2008): 1-25.
<https://apjif.org/-Cemil-Aydin/2695/article.pdf>.
- Goto-Jones, Christopher S. “Overcoming and overcome by modernity: Japan at War.” In *Modern Japan: A Very Short Introduction*, 62-88. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Goto-Jones, Christopher. “Pan-Asianism.” History 365: Overcoming Modernity in Japan. Class lecture via Zoom, 25 October 2021.
- Goto-Jones, Christopher. “Pearl Harbour.” History 365: Overcoming Modernity in Japan. Class lecture via Zoom, 28 October 2021.

³⁰⁵ Ibid, 191.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 192.

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 197.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 179.

Hotta, Eri. "The War of 'World Historical Significance'." In *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War*, 177-198. New York: Palgrave, 2008.

Mimura, Janis. "Japan's New Order and Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: Planning for Empire." *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 9, no. 49 (December 06, 2011): 1-11.
<https://apjif.org/-/Janis-Mimura/3657/article.pdf>