

**Japanese Pan-Asianism and ... Hawai'i?:  
How Japan's Anti-Colonial Ideology Worked to Legitimise the Colonisation of Hawai'i**

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**Abstract**

*Pan-Asianism, a Twentieth-Century Japanese ideology, provides a robust explanation for Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. It proposed an encompassing identity for Asia that placed Japan at the centre and appealed to many in Japan. A militant version of the ideology became dominant and became the framework for Japan's justification of its expansionist policy to rid Asia of Western influence. On the surface, this ideology has sometimes appeared genuinely anti-colonial in theory if not in practice. However, scholarship on Pan-Asianism has failed to take into account the place of Hawai'i, the site of Japan's attack against the United States. There were two main approaches to Hawai'i in Japanese thought at the time. Firstly, the mainstream Pan-Asian propaganda ignored Hawai'i and presented the attack on Pearl Harbor as an attack on the United State in general. Nevertheless, an additional specific thread of Pan-Asian thought at the time considered Hawai'i to be a part of Asia and in need of incorporation into Japan's Pan-Asian project. In some corners of Japanese thinking in the wake of the opening of hostilities, thinkers drafted plans for the governance of the islands under Japan. These two contrasting strands of thought and rhetoric show the colonial nature of the Pan-Asian ideology as it imposed whatever identity on Hawai'i that Japan found most convenient. For Japan, Hawai'i was a part of the United States when Japan needed to demonstrate victory over the West and it was a colonised Asian territory when Japan needed to justify annexation plans. Scholarship on Hawai'i demonstrates that the islands and their Indigenous people are Pacific Islanders rather than Asians in need of Japanese liberation. This research helps us understand Japan's ideology, the Pacific War, and the important place of Hawai'i in Pacific and global history.*

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<sup>130</sup> The author would like to thank Dr. Goto-Jones for his phenomenal class *Japan and the Overcoming of Modernity* that this paper was originally written for.

Pan-Asianism in early-Twentieth-Century Japan was an ideology that opposed Western colonialism and promoted an encompassing Asian identity. This ideology helps explain Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawai'i. It was a key cultural and political framework that proposed an anti-colonial identity for East Asia which appealed to many Japanese thinkers as a justification for a morally necessary war against the West. Current literature on Pan-Asianism does not address the ideology's approach to Hawai'i, the site of the beginning of Japan's war with the West and a colonized nation at the periphery of both Japanese and American thinking. The Hawaiian Islands occupy an overlooked place in Pan-Asian discourse. Some Japanese Pan-Asian thinking early in the war focused on Hawai'i and saw it as a colony of the United States in need of liberation; however, this thinking remained at the edge of Japanese rhetoric which generally saw the islands as little more than the base for the American Pacific Fleet.

At the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, some American commentators proclaimed Japan had simply gone insane, making statements such as "Whether Japan has yielded at last to pressure from Hitler, ... or whether this is ... an independent Japanese adventure, launched by a military clique in Tokyo whose powers of self-deception now rise to a state of sublime insanity, we cannot know until events have given more perspective" said one New York Times article.<sup>131</sup> Time and historical work have given us more perspective. The intellectual background of Pan-Asian thinking provides a better explanation for the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Japan did not reason for war based on minimising risk and maximising gains; cultural and spiritual motives played the key role. Pan-Asianism ideas placed Japan in the centre of a compelling story which described how Japan could create a "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" (Co-Prosperity Sphere) that would uplift Asia and throw out the influences of the oppressive colonial West, with Japan as the leading nation.<sup>132</sup> A critical step in this was the elimination of the Pacific Fleet of the United States of America, the most powerful Western military force in the Pacific, and the greatest threat to Japan's hegemony.

While this militarist Pan-Asianism became the dominant form, it was not the only strand of Pan-Asian thought. One other interpretation known as Teatism, used tea as a symbol of a shared identity across East Asia. Teatism held that the tea ceremony, which spread from China was emblematically Asian in culture and aesthetic.<sup>133</sup> This idea offered a shared sense of home across Asia based on cultural unity that was distinct from the West. This version was the most peaceful interpretation of Pan-Asianism and was about proposing a sense of a shared identity and sense of home and place.<sup>134</sup>

Another interpretation of Pan-Asianism saw China as the centre of Asia. For Japan, Sinic Pan-Asianism focused on the cultural relationship between Japan and China. Sinics saw China as a cultural benefactor of Japan, worthy of Japanese respect. This type of Pan-Asianism rested on the idea that Chinese culture was a common core of a Pan-Asian Identity.<sup>135</sup> This view abhorred Japanese military action against China, because China represented many of Japan's cultural antecedents such as the Chinese script, poetry, philosophy, and literature.<sup>136</sup> Sinic Pan-Asianism did not mean that China would necessarily dominate Asia, but its historical influence would provide a common thread of understanding.

Finally, Meishu was the form of Pan-Asianism that ultimately became the imperial framework for Japan's Asian conquests. It placed Japan at the centre of Asia to push the rest of Asia towards modern civilisation.<sup>137</sup> It also focused on Japanese grievances with the West, such as American President Woodrow Wilson's decision to prevent the addition of a racial equality clause during important

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<sup>131</sup> This newspaper article does not seriously consider the possibility that Hitler's influence was the primary factor, hinting that Japan had lost all sense of reason. The New York Times, "War with Japan," 8 December 1941. <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/historical-newspapers/war-with-japan/docview/105646819/se-2>. (Accessed 2021-12-12).

<sup>132</sup> Christopher Goto-Jones, *Modern Japan: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 83.

<sup>133</sup> Eri Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931-1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2007), 37-39.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

negotiations.<sup>138</sup> Japanese leaders and thinkers interpreted actions such as this as evidence of the West's contempt and bad-faith intentions. It reinforced Japan's status as an outsider nation in the international order and helped create a sense amongst Japanese decision-makers that Japan could not accomplish its goals through negotiations.<sup>139</sup> It became a symbol of Western disdain for Japan and its people. Meishu focused on a Japanese empire in the image of a benevolent, peaceful, and anti-imperial version of military might in contrast and opposition to the West. Meishu-style Pan-Asianism seemed to make Japanese dominion over Asia not just acceptable, but part of a necessary mission to rid East Asia of Western colonial influence.<sup>140</sup>

Meishu thinking painted a picture of Americans as decadent, materialist, and unable to muster a martial spirit such as that of Japan.<sup>141</sup> The idea of the Bushido spirit, which draws inspiration from the moral code of samurai in the Edo period, focused on the idea of a warrior identity for Japan; this became part of Japanese modern imperial ideology with a focus on national identity, martial virtue, and refusal to surrender.<sup>142</sup> Thus, with America's lack of Bushido spirit, Japanese leaders would not need to note munitions output of American factories if American soldiers would be unwilling to properly fight and swift Japanese victories would force the American government to negotiate. Under this framework, Japanese leadership was not focused on determining if its hard power was sufficient to challenge the United States, but rather, they were thinking of Japan as a uniquely capable member of the East Asian region of nations whose neighbours needed Pan-Asian liberation.<sup>143</sup> Despite the clear link between these strains of Pan-Asianism and Japan's actions in the War, many historians and public figures still use the sublime insanity hypothesis, describing Japan's war against the United States as no more than a mad bid of overconfidence. Although Japan's actions were arrogant and dangerous, a simple explanation of madness is facile. If we assume nations act only to maximise their national strategic position, we struggle to explain the attack. Indeed, much of the Japanese public and many intellectuals supported the quest against the West. A substantial number of intellectuals welcomed the end of the dissonance between anti-Western rhetoric in Japan and ongoing war in China. Honda Akira, one such thinker, said "the proclamation of war against the United States and Britain has cleared up my mind. Thanks to it, the meaning of a "holy war" has become clear."<sup>144</sup> Takeuchi Yoshimi, a prominent Japanese scholar of Chinese literature, transitioned towards a pro-war stance, saying "History was made. ... We felt a sudden fit of something that cannot quite be named springing up in our heart [sic]. ... Our Japan was not afraid of the strong after all ... It is now our determination to labour, without stint, for the true goal of creating a new order in East Asia."<sup>145</sup> Although Japanese intellectuals were often stridently anti-war with China on Sinic grounds, many of these intellectuals were in favour of war with the United States on anti-colonial grounds.

As Yoshimoto Takaaki, a Japanese philosopher and university student at the time of the war argued, the image of Japan taking the helm to provide expertise, technology, and capital to close gaps in wealth and power between the West and East Asia was morally sound.<sup>146</sup> To accomplish this with violence was more difficult to justify, but a legacy of colonial oppression forces contemporary historians to consider if it might be at least partly reasonable. Nevertheless, in the implementation of the Pan-Asian ideal, Japan became a short-lived and brutal failed empire.<sup>147</sup>

By understanding that, from a contemporary Japanese perspective, many in Japan saw the war as

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<sup>138</sup> Goto-Jones, *Modern Japan*, 74.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>140</sup> Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931-1945*, 67.

<sup>141</sup> Goto-Jones, *Modern Japan*, 83.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931-1945*, 194.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>147</sup> Some examples of the brutal nature of the Japanese Empire include economic exploitation in Manchukuo and Korea, the Rape of Nanking, the treatment of prisoners of war, and the occupation of the Philippines.

just and necessary, it is easier to understand why Japanese leaders decided to fight this war and why so many Japanese people supported it. In attacking the United States, Japan, albeit briefly, cemented a popular interpretation of Japanese identity that saw Japan as a liberator on a mission to use its might as the foremost Asian nation to free Asia from oppression and forge a bright new future.

There is, however, an aspect of Japanese Pan-Asian thinking and scholarship that is missing— the place where this war started: Hawai‘i. From my text searches of her leading book on this subject, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War*, Eri Hotta mentions “Pearl Harbor” forty-three times, but “Hawai‘i” once (only while quoting).<sup>148</sup> This likely stems from the Japanese omission of Hawai‘i in mainstream Pan-Asian rhetoric Hotta examines. The Japanese discussions Hotta cites do not focus on Hawai‘i, but rather focus on the attack at Pearl Harbor as a site of Japanese military victory over the West.<sup>149</sup> In this way, Japan’s thinkers saw Hawai‘i as a legitimate part of the West (rather than as an Asian territory occupied by the United States). In the background of Japanese thinking there were plans for Hawai‘i in the Co-Prosperity sphere as a liberated Asian nation.<sup>150</sup> This clash is particularly interesting; Japanese rhetoric saw Hawai‘i as both part of the West attacked for the good of Asia and an Asian place in need of liberation.<sup>151</sup> When describing Japanese victory, Japanese sources did not distinguish Hawai‘i from the rest of the United States. Some Japanese theorists drew up plans for a liberated Hawai‘i under Japan’s influence (sometimes justified by the large Japanese population on the islands, and sometimes justified based on a perceived Asian identity for Hawaiians).

Hawai‘i had connections to Japan before becoming a US territory; independent Hawai‘i made advances to Emperor Meiji of Japan as the country exited the period of isolationism.<sup>152</sup> There were large numbers of Japanese settlers early in Hawai‘i’s colonial period.<sup>153</sup> Hawai‘i and Japan had good relations, but later drifted apart.<sup>154</sup> Japan had the opportunity to critique America's hold on Hawai‘i on the grounds of colonisation. American and British business interests, supported by the American Government, overthrew the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893, only forty-eight years before the attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>155</sup> Yet, in the Japanese rhetoric as reported by Hotta, Japan considered Pearl Harbor to be little more than an American Navy base.<sup>156</sup> Japanese sources do not say Pearl Harbor was on Hawaiian land that Japan would liberate, rather, sources report that Japan attacked America (not an American outpost or American colony).<sup>157</sup> The salient question here is how, in an environment eager for critique of the West, was Hawai‘i forgotten.

John Stephan provides a critical piece of context: that the war planners of Japan did have a framework for integrating Hawai‘i on Pan-Asian lines. He describes how Hawai‘i was to be incorporated into a close ring of the Co-Prosperity sphere, out from under oppressive American colonialism.<sup>158</sup> Japan, however, did not see the large population of Japanese people on Hawai‘i as part of the colonisation of

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<sup>148</sup> Hotta says “The poet [Saitō Mokichi, an influential intellectual] then went on to record in his diary: ‘The red blood of my old age is now bursting with life’ because ‘the formidable imperial forces spectacularly attacked Hawai‘i!’” Which shows that even sober intellectuals were brimming with war fever. Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931-1945*, 190.

<sup>149</sup> American histories also omit Hawaiian perspectives, focusing on an attack against a unified United States.

<sup>150</sup> John J Stephan, *Hawaii Under the Rising Sun* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 3.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>152</sup> Stephan, *Hawaii Under the Rising Sun*, 17.

<sup>153</sup> Eleanor C. Nordyke and Y. Scott Matsumoto, "The Japanese in Hawaii: A Historical and Demographic Perspective," *The Hawaiian Journal of History* 11 (1977) 162-174.

<sup>154</sup> Stephan, *Hawaii Under the Rising Sun*, 12.

<sup>155</sup> Christine Skwiot, ‘Hawai‘i’, in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008),

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195176322.001.0001/acref-9780195176322-e-693>.

<sup>156</sup> Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931-1945*, 190.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>158</sup> Stephan, *Hawaii Under the Rising Sun*, 3.

Hawai'i.<sup>159</sup> Japanese plans indicated an intention for a Japanese occupation of Hawai'i on Pan-Asian grounds.<sup>160</sup> In this branch of Japanese planning, Japan attempted to show that the antecedents of Hawai'i were to be found in Asia, and that Hawai'i's natural home was in a Pan-Asian sphere.<sup>161</sup> Stephan summarises the thinking of Japanese academics and planners as "Hawaiians [are] Polynesians; Polynesians are Asians; therefore, Hawaiians are Asians."<sup>162</sup> Further to this line of thinking, Tsurumi Yusuke, a member of the Japanese Diet (Parliament) and promoter of a Pan-Pacific sphere for Japan within political circles, argued that Hawai'i must be part of Japan's greater East Asian sphere because Hawaiians are related to the Japanese.<sup>163</sup> Japanese wartime journalist Haga Takeshi attempted to take this further by working to cement a Japanese claim to Hawai'i by arguing that Japan's long-standing relationship with Hawai'i had resulted in Japanese-Hawaiian intermarriage and consequently the Hawaiian people were "an extension of the Japanese race."<sup>164</sup>

Although Japanese officials and thinkers developed this line of thinking, they did not disseminate it widely; the liberation of Hawai'i did not play a major part in Japanese rhetoric.<sup>165</sup> Stephan's evidence is found on the edges of Japanese thinking, brushed to the side of archives and reports. It is best to see two goals for Japanese Pan-Asianism in attacking Pearl Harbor that produce mutually exclusive rhetoric. The first and most important was to win victory over the West, and the second and less important was to bring Hawai'i, as they saw it, back into Asia and under Japan. In this way we see how Japan's thinkers could see Hawai'i both as part of the West (the site of their victory over the United States on American territory) and as part of Asia (a future part of the Co-Prosperity Sphere with the conquest legitimized by Pan-Asianism).

As Japan's inter-service rivalries and political factionalism demonstrate, just because some Pan-Asian planners and thinkers wanted to include Hawai'i does not mean it was a priority of national policy, even if the idea held merit for one branch of the government or military. Japan's focus after the attack on Pearl Harbor was their victory over the United States Navy, the discussion regarding Hawaiian liberation were short-lived.<sup>166</sup> The logic of Pan-Asianism provided a framework to invade Hawai'i, but the priorities of the Japanese leadership and the realities of the conflict (in particular, after the Battle of Midway in 1942 wherein Japan lost irreplaceable naval assets it needed to win the war) meant that Japan at first did not, then could not, prioritise an attack on Hawai'i or its incorporation into the Co-Prosperity Sphere.<sup>167</sup> Instead, Japan looked to disable the United States Navy at Pearl Harbor, and then to invade closer Asian nations like Malaysia and the Philippines.<sup>168</sup>

To understand the colonial context of the Japanese view of Hawai'i as a future part of the Co-Prosperity Sphere we must look to Hawaiian perspectives on whether Hawai'i is even a part of Asia. Lisa Kahaleole Hall, the University of Victoria's director of the Indigenous Studies program and an expert on race, colonialism, and Hawaiian culture, points out that Pacific Islanders, including Hawaiians, are not Asian, and that present and past attempts to view Hawaiians as Asians is an imposition on Hawaiians who do not see themselves as such.<sup>169</sup> She describes Pacific Islanders as distinct from any Asian group.<sup>170</sup> Hall emphasises that Asian-Americans are one of the largest groups of settlers on Hawaiian land (Japan did not recognize this), and that profound cultural and historical differences between the experiences of Asians

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<sup>159</sup> Stephan, *Hawaii Under the Rising Sun*, 142, 156.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-9, 135-147.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>165</sup> Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931-1945*, 190.

<sup>166</sup> Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931-1945*, 177; Stephan, *Hawaii Under the Rising Sun*, 167.

<sup>167</sup> Goto-Jones, *Modern Japan*, 85.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>169</sup> Lisa Kahaleole Hall, "Which of These Things Is Not Like the Other: Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders Are Not Asian Americans, and All Pacific Islanders Are Not Hawaiian," *American Quarterly* 67, no.3 (2015): 727-747.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

living in Hawai‘i and Indigenous Hawaiians mean that a conflation of identities is inaccurate and harmful.<sup>171</sup> Under this framework, by forcibly identifying Hawaiians with Asia, Japanese ideology unsees the Hawaiian people.<sup>172</sup> This position is relevant to Japanese Pan-Asianism as when Japanese thinking offered any attention to Hawai‘i, it was to conflate Pacific Islanders and East Asians. When Japan offered recognition to Hawai‘i, it was to propose a framework that assumed a shared Asian heritage despite a cultural and historical gulf between them.<sup>173</sup> Hall’s shows that Hawaiians were not hewn from a rightful place in Asia but rather that they are part of a group of Pacific Islanders who share cultural and historical commonalities, but are not homogeneous, and certainly not Asian.<sup>174</sup> Considering the streams of Teatist and Sinic Pan-Asianism, it is hard to see Hawai‘i in a Pan-Asian sphere. There is little evidence for a Teatist cross-regional identity, and there is no evidence to support a Sinic view that China is the cultural benefactor of the Hawaiian people.

When Japanese wartime thinking did not ignore Hawai‘i, as in the intellectual and political discourse Stephan discusses, Japanese Pan-Asianism assumed the identity for the Hawaiian people that was most convenient.<sup>175</sup> Pan-Asian ideology was sometimes sympathetic when its aims were considered however, here we find an element that is not sympathetic even in theoretical terms. Had Japan’s conquest of Hawai‘i been successful it likely would have, in classic colonial style, projected the identity it required onto Hawaiians to legitimise Japanese conquest. At the same time, we can assume that Japan would have kept its primary focus on its defeat of the West in Hawai‘i rather than focus on Hawai‘i as indigenous Hawaiian land. Therefore, Japanese Pan-Asianism addressed Hawai‘i by erasing Hawai‘i to present Pearl Harbor as an attack on the heart of the West and by insisting on an Asian identity for Hawaiians regardless of Hawaiian history or identity. Although contradictory, both strands of thought were present in Japan in the discussions on the nature of Japan’s empire. The issues underlying these points were less serious than the need for Japanese Pan-Asianism to be both an attack on the West and liberating for non-Western people at the same time.

Under Meishu Pan-Asianism, Japan’s plan was to use Hawai‘i as a bulwark for the defence and benefit of Japan.<sup>176</sup> There was no intention of respect for Hawaiian sovereignty. We can therefore see that this model of Pan-Asianism is colonial. Pan-Asianism is a complex phenomenon that becomes no less so when we try to include other perspectives, yet the analysis is both illuminating and important. Understanding Pan-Asianism is worth the attempt to overcome the complexity of the material, and there appears to be opportunities for further research into Hawaiian and Japanese perspectives on what it means to be Asian.

By understanding Pan-Asianism, we can better recognize Japan's ownership of its actions. Attributing Japan's action to “sublime insanity” overlooks the complexities and reality of Japanese decision-making. It would be logically challenging to hold Japan and its leaders accountable for wartime actions if the cause of the war truly was insanity. Japan justified the war on anti-colonial grounds that are more complex than they first appear. In Japan, this imperial ideology became popular based on an aggressive interpretation of Pan-Asian thought. The idea that Japan could build an anti-colonial empire to free Asia was intoxicating to Japanese soldiers, intellectuals, political leaders, and spiritual leaders, and provides a better explanation for the attack on Pearl Harbor.<sup>177</sup>

The example of Hawai‘i is needed to provide context and insight to Pan-Asianism. Hawai‘i sits at a place both inside and outside of the West. Japanese Pan-Asianism’s failure to deal with this shows the complexities of Pan-Asianism and the difficulties (practically and morally) of forging an identity and ideology that imposes the participation of others who may not wish to participate. The erasure of the

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<sup>171</sup> Hall, "Which of These Things," 727–747.

<sup>172</sup> Note the work of Proctor and Schiebinger on this in *The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*.

<sup>173</sup> Stephan, *Hawaii Under the Rising Sun*, 46.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>177</sup> Hotta, *Pan-Asianism and Japan's War 1931-1945*, 236.

Hawaiian people in the presentation of Hawai'i, and the projection of Asian identity onto Hawai'i by Japan's thinkers and planners reveals imperialism within the dominant Meishu branch of Japanese Pan-Asian thought itself, rather than just in the implementation of the ideology. Ultimately, whether forgetting Hawai'i or insisting on an identity that best suited Japan, Japanese Pan-Asianism could not allow Hawai'i to exist on its own terms.

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