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Emotions in Intercultural Relations

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A remarkable yet mostly overlooked feature of Akira Iriye's 1967 masterpiece, *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American–East Asian Relations*, is its implicit argument that emotions play a crucial role in international relations. As Iriye later described it, the book reflected his view that international relations could not be fully understood without delving into “the intellectual, emotional, and psychological sources” that policymakers and the public drew on in forming ideas and opinions, which in turn influenced decision-making.¹ Even as this approach became widely influential in diplomatic and international history, however, explicit attention to emotions as an analytical tool seemed to drop out of the picture. Iriye's attention to the role of mental images in shaping foreign policy and public opinion gave rise to a thriving subfield, and international historians became increasingly interested in the intangible elements of foreign relations, such as ideas, ideology, perceptions and misperceptions, and cultural interchange. Yet historians rarely focused on the emotions that underpinned these intangibles.

Meanwhile, traditionalists who focused on state-to-state relations and national security issues dismissed the cultural approach to international history as irrelevant or unimportant. The field of diplomatic and international history split into two camps: those who thought that culture mattered, and those who were sure that it did not. Though the culture camp has registered impressive growth in numbers and influence, the culture-versus-power divide continues to be one of the most contentious issues in the field. The study of emotion, which is now exciting great interest among historians, offers one possible route to bridge this long divide. Because emotions underlie both power and culture, they create links between the two forms of international relations. Indeed, emotions are not merely constitutive elements of each but are lines of transmission between the two. To study emotion is to study culture and power simultaneously.

A close examination of *Across the Pacific* shows how tightly culture and power are bound together by emotion. Iriye would later move away from this approach, arguing that culture, economics, and power were best treated

as distinct domains, to be analyzed separately.² He became less interested in foreign policymakers than in societies as a whole and the “ideas, emotions, moods, religious trends, gender relations, and the like that constitute the makeup of a society as it interacts with other societies.” In the 1990s he called for a new conceptualization of international relations as a “social context for interchanges among individuals and groups across national boundaries” in order to deal with “the roles played by ideas, aspirations, and emotions in the world.”³ Emotions remained important to his analysis, but were now limited to the cultural domain. His early magnum opus, however, was an account of power as much as culture. It treated the two as interlinked—and undergirded by emotion. In explaining the vicissitudes of U.S.–Chinese–Japanese relations from the 18th to the 20th centuries, Iriye refers to fear, anxiety, hysteria, hope, regret, affection, desperation, excitement, sympathy, revulsion, and even love. More so than his later work, the book pays homage to emotions as constitutive of worldviews and attitudes that shaped crucial decisions of war and peace.

In summative accounts of his argument, Iriye presents the view that emotions predominated in international relationships when accurate information and clear-headed assessments were lacking, as they so often seemed to be in U.S.–East Asian relations, especially before World War II. Emotions, in this view, generally work as a negative or distorting influence on foreign relations; they are the unsophisticated antithesis of intellectualism. U.S.–East Asian relations have too often been shaped by oversimplification and emotionalism, he explains in the preface. “Policies have been made on the basis of considerations tangential to the Pacific, mutual images have been formed with little basis in fact, and wars have been fought even though policies and images have not postulated wars.” His book pleads for a less emotional, more intellectual understanding. His aim, he writes, is to bring “an intellectual analysis to a situation hitherto almost devoid of it,” for “emotion, prejudice, and sentimental theorizing” have too often predominated in shaping U.S.–East Asian relationships. The book ends with an appeal to cultivate “genuine intellectual communication” instead of “propaganda, emotionalism, and excessive empiricism”; only then, he writes, “will it be possible to transcend the past and look toward a more peaceful Pacific.”⁴

To be sure, the book had ample fodder to show that emotions had often inhibited rather than enhanced genuine understanding. For over a century, for example, Americans were enthralled by the mirage of a vast China market. Evidence that such dreams were unrealistic did not lead to reassessment; rather, the result was the reverse: the more hope was deferred, the more hope for future bonanzas seemed to grow.⁵ Such a reaction, so resolutely contradicting the available evidence, seems explicable only as the result of an emotional attachment in which the object of desire became more desirable the further it receded from reach. Similarly, Japanese–American relations in the last decades of the 19th century were characterized by a sense

1 of friendship and goodwill, Iriye argues, but it was based on misperceptions
 2 and lack of understanding, rather than sensible appraisals of common inter-
 3 ests. On the American side, for example, emotionally based wishful thinking
 4 about Japan's Westernizing drive deeply colored perceptions of the country.⁶
 5 As a corollary of Iriye's preference for sound appraisals, even profoundly
 6 hostile relations could be regarded as relatively positive if they were based
 7 on realistic, intellectually credible judgments. He argues, for example, that
 8 the Chinese Revolution of 1949 put Sino-American relations on a more
 9 sophisticated footing than had prevailed before, substituting "cool apprais-
 10 als" of power considerations for the "romantic images, distortions, wishful
 11 thinking, irrelevant generalizations, and logical inconsistencies" that had
 12 guided earlier relations. Despite the dangers of Cold War hostility, Iriye
 13 wrote in 1967, Sino-American tensions were more likely than ever before
 14 to produce realistic assessments and "a saner approach to Asian problems."⁷

15 Despite these arguments for de-sentimentalizing U.S.–East Asian relations,
 16 Iriye's approach to studying the interactions between emotionally inflected
 17 images and "cool appraisals" of power continually underlined the insepa-
 18 rability of the two. On one hand, the book yoked emotions and realistic
 19 appraisals of information in opposition to each other, charting a history in
 20 which emotion prevailed when information was lacking, whereas increased
 21 contact and deeper knowledge produced more realistic opinions and deci-
 22 sion-making.⁸ On the other hand, however, throughout his analysis Iriye
 23 treats emotions as necessary to human thought. His account assumes that
 24 sentiment would never disappear and that feelings and perceptions would
 25 always play a role in shaping international relations. One could not hope
 26 that they could be mastered or erased; only that greater knowledge, deeper
 27 contact, and closer study would better ground them in reality and make
 28 them less fantastical. Again and again the book links feelings and judgments.
 29 International relations, Iriye explained, "are not rational developments" but
 30 derive from many causes, rational and emotional. "The human mind must
 31 always intervene between the world and a given policy."⁹

32 This linkage is very much in keeping with current views about the nature of
 33 the human mind. The booming interest in emotion research—in psychology,
 34 anthropology, political science, history, and other fields—is fraught with
 35 controversies over defining emotions, discerning how emotional and cog-
 36 nitive elements interact and where one begins and the other ends, and
 37 whether emotions are universal or culturally specific. Yet a consensus has
 38 emerged that reason and emotion are not antithetical forces. Neurologists
 39 and psychologists now argue that emotions are not visceral, irrational
 40 forces, which strong-minded individuals can sublimate or repress through
 41 the exertion of willpower, but rather are essential to all processes of per-
 42 ception and decision-making. Cognition and emotion are separate only in
 43 our representations of mental states, not in actual mental processes, which
 44 always and necessarily integrate the two. Like the longstanding Western

1 dichotomization of body and mind, the rational/emotional pairing is an
2 inaccurate guide to understanding human behavior. Indeed in 1997 two
3 cognitive psychologists suggested a new term for mental processes: “cogmo-
4 tion,” to represent “the interactive and inseparable nature of cognition and
5 emotion.”¹⁰

6 International historians are slowly taking up the challenges of studying
7 emotion. As yet only a tiny handful, notably Frank Costigliola and Jessica
8 Gienow-Hecht—both strongly influenced by Iriye’s cultural approach—have
9 attended explicitly to the role of emotions in foreign relations.¹¹ Costigliola’s
10 work on the politics of the Grand Alliance at the end of World War II and the
11 early Cold War demonstrates that personal relationships among leaders had
12 dramatic consequences in shaping the relationships among their countries—
13 helping to start the Cold War, as his subtitle puts it. Though focusing on the
14 emotionally based behaviors and dispositions of Franklin Roosevelt, Joseph
15 Stalin, Winston Churchill, Harry Truman, and their top advisers, Costigliola
16 is also attuned to larger cultural patterns that conditioned the expression
17 and perception of emotions. Gienow-Hecht’s study of 19th- and early
18 20th-century musical diplomacy argues that Germany’s informal musical
19 ambassadors in the United States created an emotional affinity between
20 the two countries that survived World War II. Even as we attend to these
21 exciting new lines of research, however, it is worth revisiting Iriye’s classic
22 study of “inner” relations for its insights into how to study the interactions
23 of emotions and cognition as constitutive elements of mutual images and
24 as causal factors in international relations.

25 One of the book’s important conclusions is that emotional residues from
26 the past often combine with intellectual judgments to exert a powerful influ-
27 ence on contemporary understandings. New situations arise, but the legacies
28 of prior emotional states color how people understand their world. In the
29 second half of the 19th century, for example, American observers felt a sense
30 of gratification and approbation at Japan’s Westernizing efforts. Japanese stu-
31 dents and professionals visited the United States to study educational, agricul-
32 tural, and industrial practices, and there was considerable interest in Japan in
33 aspects of U.S. political and economic life. But, as Iriye notes, Japanese leaders
34 wanted to adopt the methods that underpinned Western technological
35 and military power, not to inculcate Western values. When Japan began
36 to show tangible results from its modernizing efforts, Americans became
37 uneasy, wondering how the West would maintain its supremacy if Asia suc-
38 ceeded in Westernizing. The uneasiness points to a cognitive–emotional
39 dynamic: an awakening East could unsettle the international system and
40 pose threats to Western security and economic interests, but the sense of
41 threat was underpinned by ideological factors such as racism and a belief in
42 the superiority of “Christian civilization” and by emotions such as fear of los-
43 ing status. The sense of hope that had accompanied American observations
44 of early Japanese modernization exacerbated the sense of disappointment

1 when that program turned in threatening directions.¹² The concept of emo-
 2 tional residues, in Iriye's account, also helps explain the relative ease of the
 3 Sino-American rapprochement of the 1970s. It was not that the deep-seated
 4 feelings of hostility in place until then had been entirely superficial; rather,
 5 the shift of the 1970s was facilitated by both sides' ability to draw on older
 6 images and rhetoric of friendship predating 1949.¹³

7 Like Costigliola's study of the Grand Alliance, Iriye's account suggests
 8 that paying respect and showing deference—or failing to do so—carry
 9 great weight in international relations. As the United States and Japan both
 10 emerged as colonial powers in the Pacific beginning in the 1880s, Americans
 11 began to grow alarmed at Japanese behavior. The Russo-Japanese War of
 12 1904–05 inflamed tensions. Iriye cites the example of Willard Straight, a
 13 longtime observer of U.S.–East Asian relations and U.S. vice consul in Korea
 14 toward the end of the war. Initially only mildly concerned about counter-
 15 ing Japanese influence, Straight became incensed by what he perceived to
 16 be Japanese arrogance over their successes in the war. Having long been
 17 the underdogs, the Japanese were now full of swagger, Straight observed.
 18 “They’re going to show us a thing or two if it can be done. They hate us. God
 19 knows the feeling is mutual.” He wrote to a friend, “For no particular rea-
 20 son, with no real cause for complaint I now find myself hating the Japanese
 21 more than anything else in the world. It is due I presume to the constant
 22 strain of having to be polite and to seek favors from a yellow people. We
 23 cannot know them or understand them and they dislike us thoroughly.”¹⁴
 24 Racism—like all ideologies, a construct charged with emotion—was part of
 25 the reason for Straight's extreme reaction, as was a sense of indignation at
 26 Japan's heavy-handed treatment of Korea as they imposed a protectorate.
 27 But the sense of deep antagonism Straight expressed was also an emotional
 28 reaction to growing Japanese power. The Japanese had once seemed defer-
 29 ential, respectful, and friendly toward Americans. Straight was angry and
 30 resentful when that deference turned to arrogance and dislike.

31 Asian immigration to the United States raised similar issues. The Russo-
 32 Japanese War stoked in California feelings like the ones Straight experienced.
 33 Until the war, efforts at arousing mass emotion against Asian immigration
 34 had not succeeded. Fear triggered by Japan's new might changed the envi-
 35 ronment, and now such appeals struck a chord. A feeling that the West was
 36 on the defensive against a rising Asia fueled near-panic over the “yellow
 37 peril.”¹⁵ President Theodore Roosevelt's contrasting response was attuned to
 38 the dangers of emotionalism. Roosevelt believed that welcoming Japan into
 39 the international system as a “civilized” power would make the country less
 40 militaristic and more peaceful. He worried that anti-Asian sentiment on the
 41 West Coast would insult Japanese feelings and trigger animosity. Courtesy
 42 and friendliness, in contrast, would forestall malice.¹⁶ As Roosevelt recog-
 43 nized, intangibles with deep emotional repercussions, such as the showing
 44 of respect, could have tangible consequences for international relations.

1 Meanwhile, the Chinese felt a sense of bitterness and betrayal at the 1904
2 passage of a bill excluding Chinese immigration from American territories.
3 Some Chinese observers argued that the Chinese immigrants who had
4 helped build American railways and who had labored in American factories
5 were owed gratitude and respect for materially assisting American economic
6 growth. Chinese merchants angered at the apparent betrayal responded
7 with a boycott of American goods and services.¹⁷

8 Iriye's research also uncovered a pattern whereby American feelings for
9 China and Japan oscillated in tandem. Favorable American emotions toward
10 one country seemed tied to unfavorable emotions toward the other. Japan's
11 early modernizing efforts in the late 19th century, for example, led to unfa-
12 vorable contrasts with Chinese traditionalism. Yet when Japan's moderniza-
13 tion turned the country into a potential threat, American attitudes shifted.
14 Friendly sentiment toward China grew almost in direct proportion to rising
15 hostility toward Japan.¹⁸ "There was a psychological need," Iriye writes, "to
16 believe that China would not be another Japan, that it would somehow
17 modernize itself without posing the same threat as Japan seemed to repre-
18 sent." The ensuing half-century of Sino-American friendship, lasting until
19 the Chinese Revolution, derived from an American desire to help China
20 against Japan—but, Iriye argues, the feeling was based on false premises and
21 misunderstandings.¹⁹ In this respect, too, past emotional states influenced
22 perceptions of current events, as, for example, Americans watching China's
23 "awakening" in the early 20th century mentally mapped China into the
24 position once occupied by Japan. Hopes that had been placed on Japan
25 were now transferred to China. Because Japan was the greatest obstacle
26 to Chinese nationalism, antagonism toward Japan flowed from the new
27 American interest in China. Willard Straight, for one, translated his anti-
28 Japanese sentiments into whole-hearted advocacy of closer ties to China and
29 assistance in Chinese industrialization.²⁰

30 Morality, too, can be cited as an example of "cogmotion" in Iriye's account.
31 Iriye recognized that the moral considerations that often inflected U.S.
32 policy from about 1900 had powerful emotional components. Americans
33 identified emotionally with China's predicament as it sought to build
34 national power in a hostile environment. Straight's 1907 comments to a
35 friend highlight the emotionalism of moralism: "Ours is the opportunity
36 to befriend China in this her time of need and to aid her in straightening
37 out her affairs here." In the early 20th century Americans saw China as an
38 underdog, and Japan's aggressive policies seemed an affront to American
39 notions of fair play. According to Iriye, other nations might regard Japan
40 merely as another power, but President William Taft, by contrast, enunci-
41 ated a moral policy. Americans saw it as their mission, Iriye writes, to help
42 the victims of Japanese imperialism.²¹

43 During World War I, Woodrow Wilson's message of national self-determi-
44 nation resonated with the Chinese, creating an image that persisted through

the 1930s of America as China's "special friend." American sympathy toward China, which developed in part from sympathy for what seen as its underdog status and valiant efforts to withstand bullying, was not matched by a consensus that significant American interests were at stake. (Some of this sympathy was also instrumental, coupled as it was with arguments for naval expansion.²²) Such feelings played a role in leading the United States and Japan into an unnecessary war. American moralism meant that U.S. leaders condemned Japanese acts, such as the invasion of Manchuria in 1931, without taking specific measures, such as fortifying bases in the Pacific that might have served as a deterrent. As Iriye puts it, in the 1930s President Franklin Roosevelt was distressed that Japan did not conform to Western principles of good behavior. Yet the administration's assessment that it was only economic and not security interests that were at stake meant that such feelings could not overcome a fear of military involvement. When rhetoric was not matched by action, Japanese leaders concluded that Americans might speak idealistically but would maintain an essentially passive policy. Combined with underestimations of America's social fiber, these perceptions lined the path to Pearl Harbor. Meanwhile the Chinese, feeling helpless and desperate, had a "psychological need" (a phrase that appears often in the book) to believe that their friend, the United States, would not stand by as Japan dismembered their country. Fear of Japan and attachment to the image of a friendly America led many Chinese to overstate U.S.-Japanese antagonism and to cling to hope of American intervention. The disappointment at actual U.S. behavior was thus all the more bitter—even, at times, hysterical.²³

Emotionally inflected stories about the past, in Iriye's account, also shaped international politics. Historical memory, not as an authentic rendering of the past but as a kind of morality tale, colored U.S.-East Asian relations after World War II. Iriye implies that the widespread view that the United States and Japan went to war over China—a false view, he shows—took hold because it offered an emotionally satisfying story to all sides. This historical distortion had effects on how the public and policymakers viewed contemporary events. He argues that because Americans believed that the United States had gone to war to rescue China, they interpreted China's "ingratitude"—represented most starkly in the Chinese Communist Revolution of 1949—as especially reprehensible.²⁴

Intertwined with its emphasis on emotion is the book's attention to friendship as a construct in international relations. The word friendship and its variants (amity, friendliness, friends, friendly) rank among the most commonly used terms in the book. Its prominence is a reflection of the ways that diplomats, politicians, and the public in the United States, China, and Japan imbued foreign relations with anthropomorphic qualities. The rhetoric of friendship was employed frequently on all sides, producing images of relationships that created affective dispositions, expectations, and obligations that might be entirely unaligned with genuine mutual interests.

Yet expressions of friendship could also enhance mutual understanding by building the empathy that is necessary for each side to see the other's point of view.²⁵

What Iriye's account reveals is an international political system in which logic plays but a small role and the reactions of leaders and publics combine elements of reasoned assessment with perceptions deeply rooted in emotions. In *Across the Pacific*, "psychological needs" ensured that too often observers saw what they wanted to see—namely, the sorts of behaviors and motives that assuaged their emotional states.²⁶ Much of Iriye's indictment of mutual misperceptions is not purely emotional; cognitive biases of the sort that are now fashionable for psychologists to study also come into play. Many of the actors Iriye describes implicitly take cognitive shortcuts, rely on stereotypes, and use information closest at hand to reach judgments at odds with the facts.²⁷ But to today's reader, attuned to the "emotional turn" in history, the explicit attention to emotion is what stands out. What one sees in Iriye's renderings are that standards of individual behavior were routinely applied to international relations: selfishness in others is considered a vice; friendliness, a virtue. Publics and policymakers expect friendly behavior to elicit gratitude; respect to elicit compliance; moral exhortation to improve behavior. The world of international relations swirls with emotion.

Looking back on *Across the Pacific* after the passage of nearly half a century, it is impossible not to be struck by its extraordinary sweep and multiarchival depth, its bridging of culture and power, and its prefiguring of so many of today's trends in international history. The study of nongovernmental organizations and nonstate actors has boomed in recent years, as historians have tried to come to grips with the explosion in numbers and influence of such groups since the 1970s. *Across the Pacific* is filled with accounts of traders, missionaries, intellectuals, and students, and their interactions with government officials. Likewise, the importance of perception and misperception, historical memory, the role of ideology, and the rise of human rights—topics that became fashionable in international history only in the decades after 1967—all receive due attention in Iriye's pathbreaking book. As international historians turn their attention to emotion, it is worth remembering that in this case, too, Akira Iriye was there first.

Notes

1. Akira Iriye, "Foreword to the Revised Edition," *Across the Pacific: An Inner History of American–East Asian Relations*, revised edition Chicago: Imprint Publications, 1992, p. v.
2. Akira Iriye, "Culture and International History," in *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 215–16.
3. Akira Iriye, *Cultural Internationalism and World Order*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp. 180–1.

4. Iriye, *Across the Pacific*, pp. xvi, 390, 329.
5. Ibid., p. 14.
6. Ibid., p. 102.
7. Ibid., pp. 281, 325.
8. The dynamic is reminiscent of the then-predominant view among scholars of medieval and early modern Europe, which held that modernization was in part a process of subordinating unruly emotions to rationality, a consensus that was being challenged as Iriye was writing. Barbara H. Rosenwein, "Worrying about Emotions in History," *American Historical Review* 107 (2002): 834–6.
9. Iriye, *Across the Pacific*, pp. 57, 326.
10. Quoted in William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001) pp. 13–15.
11. Frank Costigliola, *Roosevelt's Lost Alliances: How Personal Politics Helped Start the Cold War*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012; Jessica C.E. Gienow-Hecht, *Sound Diplomacy: Music and Emotions in Transatlantic Relations, 1850–1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009. See also Alessandro Brogi, *A Question of Self-Esteem: The United States and the Cold War Choices in France and Italy, 1944–1958*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002, and Barbara Keys, "Henry Kissinger: The Emotional Statesman," *Diplomatic History* 35 (2011): 587–609.
12. Iriye, *Across the Pacific*, pp. 45–6, 60, 325–6.
13. Ibid., p. 358.
14. Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 103–4.
15. Ibid., pp. 104–6.
16. Ibid., pp. 106–7.
17. Ibid., pp. 93–4.
18. See, e.g., *ibid.*, pp. 83, 118, 141.
19. Ibid., pp. 127, 112.
20. Ibid., pp. 119–21.
21. Ibid., p. 124.
22. Ibid., pp. 135–7.
23. Ibid., pp. 177–81, 193, 199.
24. Ibid., p. 202.
25. See, e.g., Richard Ned Lebow, "Reason, Emotion and Cooperation," *International Politics* 42 (2005): 283–313.
26. See, e.g., Iriye, *Across the Pacific*, p. 219.
27. On cognitive biases, see, for example, Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2011.

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