Modernity and National Identity in the United States and East Asia, 1895–1919

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The U.S. minister to Peking could not conceal his exasperation. Charles Denby reported his opinion of Chinese diplomacy in December 1894 in terms that he knew were too strong for public disclosure: “I beg to say here confidentially and not for publication that the ignorance and helplessness of these people pass all comprehension. International Law is a sealed book to them. They know absolutely nothing. They know nothing of foreign methods or foreign countries. . . . They know nothing of such diplomacy as war demands.”

What sparked Denby’s frustration was the State Department’s instructions to him and his counterpart in Tokyo to act as “neutral channels of communication” between China and Japan while maintaining strict neutrality in the war that had broken out between them. Denby found this balancing act especially difficult, largely because of the “piteous and helpless reliance” of the Chinese officials on what they hoped would be American advocacy for their position. In despatches littered with annotations such as “omit” and “not for publication,” Denby emphasized the inability of the Chinese to comprehend the basics of contemporary international relations. Even though he recognized that Chinese officials were no match for the Japanese negotiators, he still found their helplessness and dependence irritating. The U.S. government was reluctant to act as China’s champion yet still felt a responsibility to get involved.

This episode illustrates several main themes of this book. First, it highlights the way that Americans’ ambivalence concerning their nation’s role in the world was accentuated by its involvement in East Asia. The long-standing belief in their “special relationship” with China suggested a degree of responsibility to help the Chinese, but U.S. policy had not yet fully embraced an activist role in the world. Second, it illustrates China’s struggle to adapt its worldview to the realities of modern international relations. Beginning with the 1895 defeat at the hands of the Japanese, this struggle took on particular urgency as the exigencies of the modern world made China’s traditional identity no longer tenable. Third, it foreshadows the increasingly
uneasy relationship between the United States and Japan, the two rising powers in the Pacific region. American observers were torn between their admiration for Japan’s arrival as a modern, “civilized” power and their growing apprehension concerning the goals of that power, but it was clear that they could not avoid coming to terms with it. Finally, it demonstrates the role of international affairs in the development of modern national identities as well as the importance of identities and self-images in understanding foreign relations. Although he might not have seen it this way, Denby’s outburst epitomizes the ways that national identity was shaped by the encounter with modernity at the turn of the twentieth century.

This book is first and foremost a history of ideas. In it I aim to show how examining the concepts of modernity and national identity deepens our understanding of U.S.–East Asian relations. Between the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95 and the peace conference ending World War I in 1919, the United States, China, and Japan, in different ways, found themselves questioning what it meant to be a modern nation and a modern empire in the twentieth century. I ask how their understanding of modernity shaped, and was shaped by, notions of their place in the world. How did the realization of changes occasioned by modernity transform the way the nation conceived of the international system and its place in it? For instance, America’s expansion to overseas empire was directly related to the social and economic changes of a modern society. China’s quest for a modern identity was rooted in the necessity of improving its standing in the international system, while Japan hoped it had earned a place among the modern powers. How did the evolution of national identities relate to cultural transformations, to shifts in basic values and ideologies? A striking example of this was the United States when Woodrow Wilson sought to expand America’s core mission. What was the role of power in mediating between national identity and the international system? Nothing better illustrates the critical nexus of power and identity than the clash in 1915 of the United States, China, and Japan over the Twenty-One Demands.

Implicit in the Denby quote is a recognition that American and Chinese encounters with modernity were also shaped by their interactions with Japan. On the level of ideas, Japan served for China as an exemplar and source of modernity, while for Americans Japan served as the foil against which they formed images of China and the Chinese. In the political realm, both the United States and China inevitably confronted Japan as a major player in the shifting power dynamics of the region. It was, after all, the 1895 defeat at the hands of Japan that convinced Chinese intellectuals of the need for a modern, internationalist worldview. Furthermore, as the United States realized its expansionist identity in Asia, it had to choose between accommodating and competing with Japan’s parallel dreams of expansion. Thus, the modern identities of these three nations were shaped through their interactions during this period.
The wars and major diplomatic incidents of the period from the mid-1890s through 1919 all compelled the redefining of national identity. When the United States acquired an overseas empire as a result of the Spanish-Cuban-American War in 1898, the nation engaged in a vigorous debate over its identity as a republic and an empire. The outcome of World War I did more than substantiate America's position as a major world power. It also made explicit some of the issues involved in the shaping of American national identity that were first apparent in 1898. This new role was articulated by Woodrow Wilson, who in 1917 declared it “inconceivable that the people of the United States should play no part” in establishing a new international order. Wilson firmly grounded that responsibility in “the very principles and purposes of” the nation since its founding. Those principles and purposes included a solemn responsibility to bring civilization and modernity to the rest of the world, whether through missionary proselytizing, education and reform, dollar diplomacy, or newly created international norms. The process of coming to terms with these new roles and responsibilities was especially manifested in America’s relations with China and Japan. In short, Asia served as a laboratory for American national identity.

For China too, experience in the international system caused a reexamination of its identity as an empire and a nation. From the aborted reform movement of 1898 to the May Fourth movement of 1919, Chinese intellectuals and reformers endlessly debated what it would mean for the empire to transform itself into a modern nation. Noted philosopher Liang Qichao complained in 1900 that the Chinese people “do not know the difference between the nation and the empire. Chinese people hitherto have not themselves known that their country is a country.” Quite literally, they lacked a sense of national identity. Advocating the cultivation of a “new citizen” (xinmin), Liang argued that Chinese first had to conceive of themselves as citizens of a modern nation. How, he asked, should intellectuals and politicians overcome this lack of identity and foster a sense of nationhood? What would be the intellectual and political basis of such a nation and such a state? What would the new Chinese citizens look like, and what would be their relation to a modern state? How would a modern Chinese state take its place in the emerging world order?

Although Chinese leaders were not quite as ignorant of international norms in 1894 as Denby, in his irritation, implied, Chinese diplomacy was still in its infancy. Most of the modernizing thinkers and reformers no longer truly believed in the traditional worldview of the Chinese cultural sphere, but their efforts at playing by the rules of the international system were halting and ineffectual. In the first decade and a half of the twentieth century, Chinese leaders increasingly adopted a self-consciously internationalist outlook, culminating in their efforts during the Great War to earn respect through their contributions to the Allied
cause. China participated in the war effort diplomatically by declaring war on Germany and more concretely by sending laborers to France. In Chinese eyes, these actions marked the emergence of the nation as an international player. To the Allies, however, China’s participation in the war was inconsequential. China had hoped to project a certain image to the world, but the powers did not necessarily share in China’s perception of its modern identity.

Moreover, China’s quest for a modern national and international identity during this period cannot be understood without reference to Japan and its parallel search for a modern identity. For Japan, victory in the 1894–95 war signaled the beginning of acceptance as a member of the “family of nations.” The war validated Japan’s modernization project; at home it forged a new sense of national unity and patriotism, while abroad it demonstrated that Japan had arrived as a major power. To fit its new imperial role, Japanese leaders were increasingly defining the nation in terms of what Japan was not, whether compared to the “uncivilized” Ainu minority or to the once-admired Chinese. Yet by the 1910s the question of Japan’s identity, like that of the United States and China, remained unresolved. The contest between the imperial model of the Meiji oligarchs and the push toward a broader distribution of political power challenged the very foundation of the Japanese polity. Meanwhile, Japan’s growing power in international affairs was being tested against its neighbors and rivals in the Pacific—both China and, increasingly, the United States.

On another level, I demonstrate the importance of national identity and modernity as themes by which to understand foreign relations. These concepts enable us to comprehend more fully the many dimensions of power in the Pacific. The traditional approach to studying foreign relations focuses on state-to-state diplomatic activity, although the field of U.S.–East Asian relations has long moved beyond that original paradigm, led by the works of Michael Hunt and Akira Iriye, among others. Hunt and Iriye established the importance of nonstate actors and the role of culture and ideas in U.S. relations with China and Japan in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Iriye has also highlighted the emerging internationalism in the realm of ideas and transnational institutions. This study extends those insights by showing how women played a crucial role in shaping national identity in this period. Both American and Chinese women were at the forefront of the construction of modern identities to meet the changing times, as missionaries, exchange students, and members of a transnational women’s movement. Their international experiences and their quest for modernity were integral to shaping the interactions between the United States and China.

Gender is a theme that runs throughout this work. Although women are not usually thought of as having a noteworthy role in U.S. foreign relations at this time—and none at all in China or Japan—I bring to light the ways in which American and Chinese women played key roles in shaping modern identities. American missionaries, Chinese feminists, and suffrage activists from both sides were among
the significant points of contact and influence in navigating between nationalism and internationalism and in constructing modernity. Furthermore, a gendered discourse can be found in Americans’ images of the Chinese and Japanese on the putative scale of “civilization.” The Chinese were often depicted as helpless, superstitious, and lacking in intelligence and initiative—characteristics that marked them as feminine or even childlike. Descriptions of the Japanese, by contrast, referred to them as courageous, aggressive, and enterprising—traits that fit within a masculine stereotype. Although there were many other factors (including a genuine gap between the two in military and economic power, as well as government capability), these gendered images helped reinforce the notion that China was a nation that had to be protected and led gradually toward maturity, whereas Japan deserved respect as a sometime ally, sometime strategic and economic competitor.10

Women began to play a more visible public role in world affairs around the time of World War I. Peace activists like Jane Addams and Emily Balch argued that feminist progressives should promote a principled internationalism, while organizations such as the International Woman Suffrage Alliance tried to subordinate national rivalries to a higher solidarity of international women. Although neither of these views ultimately prevailed in the general war atmosphere, they formed an important part of the debate about nationalism and internationalism in the 1910s.11

More than the work of previous scholars, this book elucidates the connections between intellectual history and the study of U.S.–East Asian relations at the turn of the century. American thinkers, from William James and Jane Addams to Herbert Croly and Walter Lippmann, explicitly pondered what American identity should be in a modern world and how American democracy should adapt to the changing international environment.12 Chinese reformers, including early Chinese feminists, sought solutions to China’s political and cultural crisis by imagining a new nation that could assume a respected place in the world.13 Some of their inspiration came from the West, but much derived from the late Meiji intellectual transformation of their near neighbor and frequent adversary, Japan.14 Thus, the intellectual trajectories of the three nations were closely intertwined, in complex and sometimes surprising ways.

Several key concepts constitute the analytical core of the book: modernity, national identity, culture, and internationalism. These words have been much used by scholars in recent years for a variety of reasons. Some have suggested that if words like “modernity” have such broad meanings, they become analytically meaningless.15 Yet the prevalence of these terms also attests to their salience as more than simply intellectual buzzwords. Since one cannot adequately understand the history of the early twentieth century without concepts such as these, I define below how I use these terms in this book.
This book is about ideas of modernity. As such, I am not trying to establish exactly what modernity “was” at the turn of the century. Rather, I am interested in how Americans, Chinese, and Japanese each thought about modernity at this time—what it meant for them and how they responded to that idea. Nor was there a hegemonic, universal definition of modernity; the American version of modernity was no more correct than the formulations of Chinese or Japanese thinkers.

In his book *Colonialism in Question*, Frederick Cooper asks, “Is modernity a condition—something written into the exercise of economic and political power at a global level? Or is it a representation, a way of talking about the world in which one uses a language of temporal transformation while bringing out the simultaneity of global unevenness, in which ‘tradition’ is produced by telling a story of how some people became ‘modern’?”

This is a useful distinction, although there are several assumptions embedded in the way Cooper frames the question. He suggests that in either sense, talking of modernity is de facto an exercise of power—for instance, that a “modern” society exercises economic and political hegemony over others on a global level. Similarly, in discussing the representation of modernity, he seems to imply that “telling the story” of some people’s progress toward modernity necessarily consigns others to the category of “traditional.”

Yet it is also possible to tell one’s own story of modernity, to separate out and label certain elements of one’s own culture as “traditional” while identifying other aspects as usable building blocks of a modern identity. Chinese women, for instance, experimented in the 1910s with formulations of a modern identity without entirely rejecting a basis in Chinese culture.

It is important to note that I am not equating “modern” and “Western.” Modernity was not an exclusive property of the West, which the Chinese and Japanese reformers had to emulate. I argue instead that they envisioned the possibility of multiple modernities and multiple paths to modernity, which remained an elusive, dynamic, and shifting goal. I am particularly interested in how Americans, Chinese, and Japanese themselves thought about modernity and how they saw it as a representation of their status in the scale of civilization.

Americans, of course, were the least troubled by where they stood in the spectrum of “traditional” and “modern.” In some fields, such as social reform, American thinkers frankly acknowledged they had much to learn from Europe. Yet overall Americans enjoyed a confident self-image, especially after the Spanish-American War of 1898. Orators like Albert Beveridge could boast of the United States possessing the highest and most advanced civilization. Americans thus categorized others according to perceived levels of civilization or modernity, a comparison that generally favored Japan over China.

As scholars like Rebecca Karl and Xiaobing Tang have shown, Chinese reformers were acutely conscious of the “global unevenness of modernity,” of the inescap-
able fact that the distinction between “modern” and “traditional” was not simply a historical one but a geographic divide as well. Modern nations and traditional societies existed simultaneously in the world, and China faced the dilemma of how to bridge that gap. I propose to go one step further and argue that Chinese intellectuals and reformers perceived the unevenness of modernity within Chinese society as well. To adapt the terminology of German philosopher Johann Fichte, we can speak of “internal frontiers” of modernity. Chinese feminists, for instance, sought to extend those internal frontiers as they constructed representations of the “new Chinese woman.” Similarly, when Japanese intellectuals and political leaders categorized the Ainu people or the urban poor of Tokyo as “not civilized,” they were attempting to delineate internal frontiers of modernity and “Japaneseness” within the ethnic and geographical boundaries of Japan.

Modernity as a condition is often used by scholars of U.S. foreign relations who use the term to mean simply the result of modernization. Even in that sense, however, the condition of modernity often entailed an attempt to represent or interpret what that process of modernization meant. American progressives in the first two decades of the twentieth century were certainly concerned with the political and economic effects of modernization. Industrialization, urbanization, and immigration combined to render American society nearly unrecognizable to those who looked back to a supposedly simpler time. Social commentators decried the sense of alienation borne out of excessive individualism and isolation; modernity seemed to bring a kind of spiritual malaise. The closing of the frontier and the acquisition of overseas territories led many to charge that Americans had lost touch with the bedrock values on which they believed the Republic was founded. A profound sense of unease regarding changing material conditions, external relations, and moral values led these pessimists to view modernity as an alteration for the worse. Yet others saw modernity as the culmination of American progress, the enviable state achieved by the world’s most enlightened civilization. In this narrative, modernization—industrial, economic, and social—and the superiority of American democratic values combined to promise a future of limitless possibilities for a newly confident American nation. Theodore Roosevelt represented both strains, exemplifying both confidence and anxiety about American modernity.

Both admirers and detractors knew that the new era entailed cultural and philosophical adjustments to modernity. Writers such as John Dewey, William James, Herbert Croly, and Walter Lippmann explored the psychological and ethical implications for individual citizens and their relation to the wider community. Others responded by retreating into a kind of alienation or antimodernism. Modernity was considerably more than factories and bureaucratization; it was a state of mind, an altered sense of self. In various ways, Americans endeavored to export their vision of modernity to East Asia.
Nation, according to Charles Tilly, “remains one of the most puzzling and tendentious items in the political lexicon.” This may be true, but that makes it all the more necessary to be clear about its meaning in any given context. Anthony Smith defines a nation as “a named community of history and culture, possessing a unified territory, economy, mass education system and common legal rights.” He acknowledges that this is an “ideal type” and that many nations lack some of these attributes. He concludes that “nations can be seen as both constructs”—by which he means visions to which nationalist movements aspire—“but equally as real, historical formations”—which he sees as rooted in ethnic identities. For Smith, a nation as “construct” is merely one still in process of formation.

Here I am less interested in the concrete social and political processes that formalize ethnic groups into nations than in the ways in which people think of themselves as a nation. In this I largely agree with Ernest Gellner’s definition: “Nations are the artefacts of men’s convictions and loyalties and solidarities. A mere category of persons (say, occupants of a given territory, or speakers of a given language, for example) becomes a nation if and when the members of the category firmly recognize their certain mutual rights and duties to each other in virtue of their shared membership of it. It is their recognition of each other as fellows of this kind which turns them into a nation, and not the other attributes, whatever they might be, which separate that category from non-members.” In other words, features such as land and history may or may not be necessary for nation formation, but they are not sufficient without a collective act of self-definition. It is this process of self-definition and redefinition that we find in the United States, China, and Japan at the turn of the century. Americans, who had the strongest sense of nationhood, were nevertheless engaged in a constant process of reinvention and renegotiation concerning those shared attributes, rights, and duties. Of particular relevance for my argument was the question of those shared duties vis-à-vis America’s role in the world. On a more fundamental level, as Chinese reformers sought to define the attributes of a modern Chinese nation, they were simultaneously defining themselves as “new citizens,” in Liang Qichao’s phrase. Chinese women in particular found this to be a moment in which they could lay claim to shared rights and duties as full-fledged members of the inchoate nation.

With these points in mind, I turn to the question of national identity. I use “national identity” in two related but analytically distinct senses: the identity of the nation as a whole and the identity or self-identification of individuals within the nation. The first refers to the relational position of the nation—how its members see the nation in relation to the world, how they choose to project its image in the international arena, and how the nation is perceived by others. The second de-
scribes how individuals identify with the nation, its culture and values—in short, how they see themselves or wish to be seen as citizens of the nation.

A nation’s relational position in the world was in part a straightforward question of power—military, political, and economic—that ranked states in a Darwinian hierarchy of strength. But, as already noted, for Americans, Chinese, and Japanese, their sense of identity was also closely linked with the nation’s position on what each assumed to be the global scale of modernity. Thus, a large part of their self-image derived from perceived comparisons with other nations, and especially with each other.

A nation’s self-defined identity is also closely tied to what its members generally agree to be its fundamental myths, symbols, and values—in short, its culture. “Culture” here can be defined as an intangible but strongly felt context of socially constructed symbols and ideologies, ideas and influences that are both consciously created and unconsciously received, and social practices and “traditions,” whether genuine or invented. This expansive concept includes both the social context described by anthropologist Clifford Geertz and the consciously created realm of ideas that Akira Iriye defines as “the creation and communication of memory, ideology, emotions, life styles, scholarly and artistic works, and other symbols.” A culture is historically contingent and constantly evolving. It may not be consistent or coherent, but at any given time most nations have a set of beliefs and values that the majority of its citizens recognize as central to an understanding of the identity of their nation. American core values of liberty, democracy, and individual rights were at the heart of the 1898 debate over republic versus empire. Late-nineteenth-century Chinese scholars, resisting the potent influence of Western ideas, took their stand on the basis of “Chinese learning for the essence.”

Contrary to Geertz, who asserts that “culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed,” I argue that culture can indeed be a form of power. For instance, cultural context can not only influence the way that individuals make decisions regarding other people, it can make one’s own culture appear to be self-evidently the right way, the only way to do things. This perspective then can lead to the urge to impose one’s culture on others—whether it be missionaries determined to plant Christianity and the “civilized” way of life or merchants and diplomats intent on opening treaty ports to free trade or officials of the Chinese court refusing to deal with Westerners on any but their own terms. Thus, the cultural context that shapes a person’s or a group’s thinking influences how that person or group interprets and deals with others and how the Other is perceived.

Often this self-image is reinforced by defining the boundaries between self and the Other—that is, defining who “We” are by emphasizing who is “not-Us.” As David Campbell has suggested, “Identity is constituted in relation to difference.”
Moreover, the constitution of identity is achieved through the inscription of boundaries that serve to demarcate an ‘inside’ from an ‘outside,’ a ‘self’ from an ‘other,’ a ‘domestic’ from a ‘foreign.’ We can add to this notion of boundaries the possibility of internal frontiers to arrive at a more dynamic model of identity, one that assumes a degree of flux in identifying self and other.

All three peoples in question here rooted their national identity in a sense of exceptionalism and superiority. Even from colonial times, Americans saw their fledgling nation as standing apart, superior to the Old World monarchies in character and institutions. China had long defined its identity as an empire by its centrality in the universal order and its superior relationship to the surrounding barbarians. (Both American exceptionalism and the Chinese world order are tropes that did not always match reality.) And Japan defined itself as civilization and modernity, initially versus the barbarian Ainu and later vis-à-vis neighboring Asian countries including China.

Thus, national identity derives both from fundamental values and culture and from how the nation sees, or wishes to see, itself in relation to the rest of the world. This identity shapes how the nation acts in relation to the world, its foreign relations. Decisions and actions in foreign relations are usually consonant with the nation’s core values and ideologies, but some of the most interesting inflection points occur when there is a disjunction between values and actions. The international context can alter quickly, but cultural change often occurs more gradually. Some examples of this, which will be discussed in the book, include the United States coming to terms with its new status as an imperial power and China adjusting its worldview to the new international order. When the United States became an imperial nation and a major world power at the beginning of the twentieth century, a broadly based debate sought to reconcile this new foreign policy stance with previously held values and beliefs. As China absorbed the shock of defeat in 1895, forward-looking thinkers began to question the values that lay at the heart of the Chinese nation.

Foreign policy decisions and the changing international context can also precipitate changes in national identity and values, although resistance may delay cultural change and acceptance of the new identity. For instance, in 1917, when Woodrow Wilson declared that the United States had the responsibility to play a leading role in the new international system, many Americans were not ready to accept this new identity and all that it entailed. Yet thirty years later, after another global war, the idea that the United States should “lead the free world” had become internalized as part of the consensus of how most Americans saw themselves.

The second meaning of national identity describes how individuals identify with the nation, its culture and values, and its position in the world. People’s identities, of course, are made up of multiple affiliations and identifications. Usually an individual’s configuration of identities is stable and unproblematic; but in
times of crisis, rapid change, or other dissonance, individuals may be forced to confront their assumptions about how they identify with the nation (as a social-cultural body) or the nation-state (as a political entity). Chinese reformers in the early twentieth century debated what it would mean to be “new citizens” of the yet-to-be-determined modern Chinese nation-state. American progressives such as John Dewey and Walter Lippmann questioned how modernity was altering the traditional relationship of individual citizens to a democracy, while Wilson explicitly tied American values and identity to what he saw as its inescapable role in the international order. Meanwhile, George Herbert Mead and Jane Addams argued that strong attachment to nationalist identity was merely a phase in the progression toward a higher internationalist consciousness. American women missionaries in China, however, negotiating the multiple categories of gender, race, and culture, did not consciously question their affiliation with American imperial power. If anything, their encounters with the Chinese served to reinforce their own sense of Americanness, even as their Chinese Christian converts developed hybrid cultural identities. Chinese women, for their part (whether Christian or not), consciously looked to international exemplars of new women. Their quest for a modern identity was intimately tied to their growing internationalist outlook. And during World War I, American and European feminist pacifists sought to reconcile the conflicting loyalties of nationalism and internationalism.

Only recently have international historians begun to consider the role that gender plays in the construction and representation of national identity. The nation is often personified by a female figure: Marianne embodied the French Revolution, while her close relative, the Statue of Liberty, or Columbia, symbolized American values. This trope signified the role of women as carriers of the nation’s cultural values, which must be defended (by men). Women were responsible for transmitting these values either literally, as mothers of future citizens, or metaphorically, as seen in the common motif of the goddess Civilization taming the wilderness. The metaphorical and the literal came together in the form of women missionaries, whose goal was to bring modern civilization and American values to Chinese women and girls and to encourage them to reproduce those values by establishing Christian households.

Moreover, in many societies military service was required for full membership in the body politic, whether as loyal subject or as patriotic citizen-soldier. Jean Bethke Elshtain analyzes what she calls the “discourse of armed civic virtue” in the Western tradition, in which the male “Just Warrior” and the female “Beautiful Soul” each has a prescribed role in maintaining the civitas. In times of war and national crisis, when men defended the homeland, women sought other ways to demonstrate their patriotism. Chinese women revolutionaries formed Dare-to-Die brigades and thought they had thereby earned political rights in the newly formed Republic. American pacifists like Jane Addams argued, unsuccessfully, that
constructive ideals of peace, not primitive war making, represented a higher form of patriotic citizenship. Addams, fellow pacifist Emily Balch, and suffragists such as Carrie Chapman Catt exemplified an international outlook that was far from a one-world globalism. They believed internationalism was fully compatible with a nationalist identity.

*Internationalism vs. Globalization*

With the recent rise of the new global history, internationalism has sometimes been conflated with “globalization,” itself a capacious and contested term. Some scholars even suggest that “internationalism” is merely an outdated and inaccurate way of referring to the phenomenon that should properly be considered globalization. Here I am dealing with ideas of internationalism, which I maintain should be kept conceptually distinct from globalization.

Scholars of globalization do not always agree on the definition or periodization of the phenomenon. In one version, according to Anthony G. Hopkins, the period from 1800 to 1914 represents “modern globalization” (the third phase after archaic and protoglobalization), characterized by “the rise of the nation-state and...
the spread of industrialization.”41 The peak of this phase, from 1850 to 1914, saw an intensification of global networks of trade, investment, and communications; the rise of multinational corporations; and the emergence of international organizations. Walter LaFeber concurs that the world was more globalized in the late nineteenth century than the late twentieth, citing the fact that “a greater portion of the world’s wealth was invested in foreign countries than now,” especially “with the aid of new communications and transportation networks.”42 In economic and technological terms, the world was undoubtedly highly globalized around 1900.

Even so, these global linkages of capital, manufacturing, and technology were still very much nationally driven and nationally based. American, British, and European investors competed with each other for overseas opportunities. Even the multinational consortia that invested in Chinese railways were plagued by lack of cooperation among the different national investors. Manufacturers that reached worldwide markets, like the McCormick Harvesting Machine and Singer Sewing Machine companies, were decidedly American corporations, peddling identifiable American products. By contrast, one of the features of late-twentieth-century globalization was the prominence of global corporations acknowledging only the loosest of ties to their “home” country. Popular business writer Kenichi Ohmae argued that in the “borderless world” of the 1990s, not only should employees of global corporations share a worldwide loyalty to the corporate entity, but this identification should supersede mere national allegiance: “Country of origin does not matter. Location of headquarters does not matter. The products for which you are responsible and the company you serve have become denationalized. . . . People may work ‘in’ different national environments but are not ‘of’ them. What they are ‘of’ is the global corporation.”43 This is a globalization that is truly transnational; it transcends national identity.

In the late nineteenth century, however, country of origin and national identification did matter, not only in the economic sphere but also among the emergent international organizations. For instance, the deliberations of the International Peace Conferences at The Hague in 1899 and 1907 (see chapter 5) did not aim to define what came to be known in the late twentieth century as universal human rights but instead aimed to govern behavior between nations. Other international organizations that aimed to set globally agreed-on standards were often simply universalizing a particular set of national standards, mostly British. “From constitutions to consumer tastes,” concludes Hopkins, “from weights to measures, and from the creation of postal services to the colonization of time, it was the national stamp that sealed global connections.”44 The globalization of the late nineteenth–early twentieth centuries hardly meant that the nation-state or national identity were becoming obsolete.45

Thus, when I use the terms “internationalism” and “internationalization,” the stress is on international—between nations. In this sense, American, Chinese, and
Japanese intellectuals, policymakers, and activists were increasingly conscious of their nation’s role in the world—how it should behave and how it was perceived in the international arena. This was not limited to state-to-state relations; it also encompasses nonstate actors, such as Chinese women seeking comparisons between China’s status in the world and that of Western nations. Internationalism, in this sense, did not supersede national consciousness but reinforced it. For instance, when Woodrow Wilson advocated a self-consciously internationalist role for the United States, he saw such a move as firmly grounded in American national values and a strong consciousness of what America was and should be. When nineteenth-century travelers from several Tokugawa domains ventured outside the country, they became aware of their common identity as Japanese. For Chinese intellectuals of the late Qing, a sense of China’s weakness in the international system lent urgency to the project of strengthening the nation. The nationalism of Chinese students in Japan in the early twentieth century was awakened by discovering how others saw them in derogatory stereotypes (most famously Lu Xun).

Even an emerging internationalist consciousness, as exhibited by Chinese and Western women suffragists, was still actuated by national goals. When a writer in the missionary publication *Nüduobao* exhorted Chinese women to become “citizens of the world,” she did not mean that they should shed their Chinese identity to become global citizens; instead, they had an obligation to be well-informed about world affairs in order to help strengthen the Chinese nation.\(^46\) And meetings of organizations like the International Council of Women and the International Woman Suffrage Alliance often began with ceremonies expressing nationality, including “native” songs and dances and parades of delegates wearing their “national” costumes.\(^47\) Even during this period of rising internationalism, ideas of nation and national identity remained strong.

Each of the three sections of this book highlights a different way in which the above themes and concepts intersect. Part I explores the ideas of modernity and national identity and their context in the United States, China, and Japan. Chapter 1 looks at the roots of national identity in the years leading up to the 1890s, as all three nations constructed their identities through conceptions of civilization and barbarism. All three saw themselves as exceptional and superior to the Other, which was variously defined. The paradox, however, was that exceptionalism coexisted with universalism. All three believed that they alone embodied civilization, compared to the surrounding “savages” or “heathens.” At the same time, they held to a belief in transformation: Confucianism or American values could be taught, and the barbarians could be civilized. This paradox was particularly evident in the dual images that Americans held of the Chinese as both hopeless heathens and
promising pupils. They contrasted feminized views of China with impressions of Japan as a formerly “barbarous” country that had successfully imitated the Western model of civilization and now displayed admirable masculine virtues.

In chapter 2 I assess changes in national identity as Americans, Chinese, and Japanese confronted modernity embodied in shifting configurations of international power around 1900. The United States and Japan both became imperial powers in the 1890s, while China began to face the implications of imperial decline. The outcome of the Spanish-American-Philippine War caused Americans to debate quite explicitly which core values were central to their national identity. The Japanese began to redefine civilization in terms of representations of modernity, and they wished to separate from the rest of Asia and be seen as part of the modern, Western international system. Chinese thinkers, for their part, abandoned what was left of the Chinese world order and endeavored to understand their position in a very different international order. Intellectuals led the way in charting new ideologies to form the basis of a modern Chinese nation that could compete and survive in the world.

Part II focuses on the transnational interplay of ideas about modernity and identity and adds to existing scholarship by demonstrating the important role that women played in that process. Chapter 3 examines what happened when the paradox in American identity encountered the Other, as American women missionaries sought to bring modernity and American civilization to China. Here I explore categories of gender, culture, and race in the formation of hybrid cultural identities among the Chinese Christian converts. By contrast, the missionaries’ identity was reinforced, along with their faith in American culture and values, even as they did not question their identification with imperial American power. Confident in their own cultural and national identities, they acted as beneficent imperialists.

Chapter 4 suggests that as Chinese women sought to define their identity as new women in a modern nation, the “global unevenness of modernity” was replicated within China. They observed and reported on what they perceived to be the characteristics of modernity and power in the West, especially among American women. They saw modernity not as a property of the West but as a universalizable quality and the key to forging a new role as modern Chinese women. Moreover, in their demand for suffrage in the inchoate nation, they were conscious of belonging to a transnational movement for women’s rights. American and European suffrage leaders recognized the efforts and achievements of the Chinese activists, welcoming them to membership in the international community.

The linkage between national identity, modernity, and international relations becomes explicit in Part III. Chapter 5 examines internationalism as the modern manifestation of national identity on the eve of World War I. The New Nationalism in the United States reexamined both the relationship of the individual
political power and the position of the nation in the world. The U.S. government now took an active interest in the modernization of China, through both long-standing support for reform efforts and the newer tool of dollar diplomacy. China, meanwhile, was adopting an increasingly internationalist stance, endeavoring to establish itself as a full-fledged participant in international organizations. And the death of the Meiji emperor in 1912 exposed the ongoing contestation over the nature of Japan’s imperial modernity. As Japan increasingly sought to position itself as one of the great powers, Japanese ambitions for expansion came into conflict with American plans for the Asian continent.

In chapter 6 these approaches to internationalism are tested in the crucible of war, which exposed the limitations of forging national identities through foreign relations. Woodrow Wilson articulated a vision of American identity that drew together core values and foreign policy, demanding that the United States assume active leadership of the new world order. But his government’s actions during the Great War failed to protect China’s interests against Japanese encroachment, and the refusal of the U.S. Senate to accept the League of Nations covenant was tantamount to America’s rejection of the international role that the president envisioned. China saw the war as its opportunity to step forth onto the modern stage by making positive contributions to the Allied war effort, only to find that it still could not command the respect of the major powers. Worse, China found that the supposed new internationalist principles were no defense against the growing power of Japan. Japanese leaders, too, saw the war as an opportunity, an opening to pursue their expansionist agenda on the Asian mainland. Yet they found that the imperial modernity so confidently developed during the Meiji era was insufficient to meet the exigencies of the changing international order. For all three nations, then, the question of an appropriate national and international identity remained hotly contested as the world entered a new era in 1919.

The concluding chapter takes a brief look ahead at some of the unresolved issues and the way they played out after 1919, most notably in China’s May Fourth movement and the Washington Conference of 1922. In the post–World War I environment, issues of national identity, internationalism, and modernity remained as important as ever.
Part I

Ideas and the Making of Identity
This book is primarily about ideas, and so I begin by examining the roots of those ideas. What was the basis of national identity for the United States, China, and Japan before the period in question? How did those images and ideologies change as each of the three grappled with ideas of modernity at the turn of the century?

Americans, Chinese, and Japanese, to varying degrees, all considered themselves exceptional, embodying either the highest development of civilization or simply Civilization itself. Implicit in this is a comparison to others, “barbarians” or “heathens.” It is, of course, a commonplace to state that a significant component of identity is defined in opposition to the Other, whether real or imagined. Yet what makes this observation critical in the case of these three countries are the similarities among them and the ways they related to each other. They frequently used discourses of race to distinguish themselves from the Other, but “race” turned out to be a fluid concept. For many Americans, the “Anglo-Saxon race” denoted a degree of civilization or cultural attainment rather than ethnicity. Chinese nationalists debated the political implications of using terms for “the yellow race,” which included all Asians in a common struggle against the white race, versus the Han lineage, which would exclude the alien Manchus from membership in the Chinese nation.

Each of the three also used the others as a foil in defining its own identity. For instance, although Americans were primarily oriented toward Europe, they also frequently cited China as the antithesis of what the United States should be. To accuse his countrymen, as Theodore Roosevelt did, of “play[ing] the part of China” was a rhetorical trope meant to remind Americans of who they really were and what they stood for. Moreover, when missionary and popular writers compared the Chinese—coded as weak, feminine, and primitive—with the Japanese—vigor- ous, manly, and honorary Anglo-Saxons—they were delineating the desired traits of the American national character. The Chinese, for their part, traditionally saw all others as inferior, but as nineteenth-century reformers faced the implications of China’s weakened position, they began to look to the United States and Japan as sources of examples and inspiration. Japan’s idea of its place in the world had had to cope with the self-proclaimed centrality of China, but nineteenth-century travelers, politicians, and writers increasingly sought to cast China as the has-been and Japan as the new locus of civilization in Asia. Even as Meiji political, economic, and military reformers took their cues from Europe, especially Prussia and Britain, the oft-stated ambition of the modernizers was to compete with the United States for economic and political supremacy in the Pacific.

In order to understand the formation and evolution of national identity in any one of the United States, China, or Japan, we begin by looking at commonalities and differences among them as they encountered ideas of modernity late in the nineteenth century.