Obituary

EDWIN OLDFATHER REISCHAUER

(1910–1990)

An Appreciation

The death of Edwin O. Reischauer on September 1, 1990, removed from the American academic scene its leading specialist on modern Japan. In few other fields of history has a single individual been able to dominate so many aspects of a bloc of world history and make the subject his own. One explanation for this lies in the fact that, following World War II, Japan remained a relatively undeveloped field of study in America. There was, as a consequence, an urgent need for historians working with the newly popular theories of historical change to devote attention to Japan. Reischauer understood the nature of the modernization transformation of East Asia, and led the way to the application of these ideas through his encouragement of the newly formed *Journal of Asian Studies* in 1956. From his primary base at Harvard, he saw his influence spread through his work and that of his students. This influence reached maturity in the 1970s and 1980s with the proliferation of Japanese studies in American academic institutions and the publication of a remarkable quantity of research literature and research and teaching aids that helped define a new academic field at the university level.

Edwin Reischauer's life spanned the inner eighty years of the twentieth century, during that special period in history known as Japan's modern era. He lived at the center of the evolution of his field, emerging as its single most prominent figure and gaining recognition far beyond the scholarly world, in that of foreign policy and affairs. How are we to account for his extraordinary achievements? There is, of course, the matter of the stars. Born in Japan and blessed, more than most ordinary mortals, with uncommon vigor and intellectual perception, Edwin Reischauer lived at precisely the right moment to exercise his talents. Japan was still considered a backward Oriental nation, and as a boy Reischauer witnessed Japan's recovery from a political and social transformation of sufficient proportions to be characterized by most historians as Japan's modern revolution.

As the son of missionaries, Reischauer was encouraged to take a direct interest in the people and culture of Japan. Since at the time the missionary movement was being critically reevaluated in both Japan and America for what it had given the Japanese people, his upbringing as a *gaijin* in Japan required of him a rethinking of values. It had provided him with two homelands with contrasting cultures. His handling of this intellectual conflict was closely wrapped up in his concept of BIJ (Born in Japan), a status he saw as a special gift that sets one apart. Reischauer was extremely proud of the fact that he had been born in Japan. As a BIJ myself, I, too, have felt the responsibility of this legacy. A BIJ was committed to a positive attitude toward the Japanese. The archenemy of such a point of view was, of course, what had become the misconceptions that Westerners had of Japan. Reischauer

recognized an obligation to interpret Japan with the full power of intellectual objectivity, and, early on, became committed to a search for truth about Japan, but this was to be on a secular basis. Beyond that, he felt a moral obligation to try to explain the mystique of Japan to others, a cause he took up with missionary zeal. He was further encouraged by the world-mindedness of his alma mater, Oberlin College, and, later, at Harvard, where he found a fertile field for his mission.

At Harvard, Reischauer, systematically moved toward his career goal. What we now call Japanese Studies was not yet in existence, but most of the ingredients were at hand, and Harvard provided the support to one who had the daring to push ahead. Before the outbreak of the war in 1942, Reischauer had already moved into this field, conscientiously working with his mentor, Serge Elisseeff, to develop language courses and teaching materials to go with them. It was his characteristic approach that, instead of thinking in generalities and seeking support for language studies in general, he made a direct approach to the United States Navy and began to move toward the establishment of a Navy language school at Harvard. It was this move that led ultimately to the whole support structure for the national expansion of Japanese language studies.

During the decade and a half after the war that he saw as the "Golden Age" of East Asian Studies at Harvard, Reischauer became head of the new Department of Far Eastern Languages. He held a joint appointment in the History Department and rapidly rose to become professor of Japanese History. Closely related to language was the need for general information courses for the development of an undergraduate and master's level program in the East Asian studies field. The History of Far Eastern Civilization, which was taught jointly with John K. Fairbank, gradually became known as "Rice Paddies," a course that introduced hundreds of students to the study of Japan. Auditing it as one of his first graduate students, younger than my teacher by only seven years, I was fascinated by the passion and intensity of Reischauer's style. He obviously loved teaching. His "machine-gun" delivery kept students alert, and if concentration dared to wander, it was quickly brought back by his mesmerizing habit of juggling his long key chain to punctuate important points. But underlying the entire presentation was a clarity of thought and a richness and precision of vocabulary that revealed a superior mind at work.

Of course, Harvard ultimately was not alone in establishing undergraduate Japanese Studies programs, but the early Harvard initiatives were critical in setting a model, and others drew inspiration from them. Within ten years, the field had reached most major universities in America.

While the early years of Japanese studies primarily involved undergraduate training, graduate studies also were essential. Harvard was fortunate to have an in-house facility, the Harvard Yenching Institute, able to provide support for research projects and library acquisitions. Although the major emphasis at the advanced level had been directed towards Chinese Studies, when Reischauer became director of the Harvard Yenching Institute, it was adjusted to suit his needs to nourish a vigorous program of Japanese Studies as well.

Edwin Reischauer's *kanreki*, his sixtieth birthday celebration, was a festive occasion that took place in Cambridge in 1970. It was attended by numerous friends and former students. The after-dinner speechmaking brought many aspects of his career to light, not the least of which was the devotion of his students and their enthusiasm for the field that he had illuminated for them. There was a good deal of joshing about the fact that Reischauer had not only created the field of Japanese studies singlehandedly, but with his many publications had so monopolized it that there was little left for his students to write.

Japanese history was his most prolific field and at the time of his death he was writing his thirteenth book. His series of publications started with *Japan Past and Present* (1946, rev. 1963), a short, popular history that was later amplified and rewritten under the title, *Japan, the Story of a Nation.* This book, based on interpretive ideas current in western and Japanese literature, became the first one-volume general history of Japan using an up-to-date conceptual structure. Reischauer then turned to a number of works of contemporary political analysis, the most recognized being *The United States and Japan* (1950, rev. 1957, 1965). It established a new level of interpretation based on the works of Japanese and American professional historians. The work which most characterizes his historical prowess is the series of history texts, *East Asia, the Great Tradition* (with John K. Fairbank, 1960) and *East Asia, the Modern Transformation* (with John K. Fairbank and Albert M. Craig, 1965). His 1977 volume entitled *The Japanese*, still another book of a broadly interpretive nature, was destined to become his most widely read.

When the Reischauer brothers, Robert and Edwin, were growing up in Japan the possibility of an ambassadorship hardly could have entered anyone's mind. That would have been a fulfillment of the BIJ objective too unimaginable to dream of. Even during Edwin's first Harvard career, it seemed unthinkable. When, in 1961, President John F. Kennedy appointed Edwin Reischauer Ambassador to Japan, the choice came as a stunning shock to many of his friends and students. This extraordinary appointment not only bypassed the usual foreign service hierarchy, but made the unprecedented selection of an academic for the post. Taking a "giant step from the comfortable obscurity of academic life" to the Tokyo Embassy cannot have been easy, but it was most certainly a challenge, especially for a BIJ. Reischauer now had the opportunity to turn full circle and instead of teaching Americans about the mysteries of Japan, to explain the United States to the Japanese. He and his wife, Haru Matsumoto, both citizens of two worlds, moved into the Embassy and initiated a new era of Japanese-American relations. Throughout his five and a half years in Japan as ambassador, Reischauer's theme, according to his autobiography, was of a "fruitful partnership" between Japan and America, together building "a peaceful and prosperous world."

Scholars have judged Reischauer primarily from an academic viewpoint, but the world obviously views him in a different way. In the national press, he is invariably referred to as "diplomat" or "Ambassador." I will not attempt to document his political successes in this scholarly journal since they have already been so fully covered in the national media. Suffice it to say that "the Reischauer years" are usually recognized as a period of enlightenment in Japanese-American diplomacy. From the academic standpoint, the most fascinating aspect of his early years as Ambassador was the dialogue that emerged between American and Japanese professional historians over interpretations of history. At the center of this debate was the interpretation of concepts such as "modernization" and "feudalism." The fact that an American ambassador was able to talk directly to Japanese intellectuals, particularly the Marxists, seemed a shocking development. An oblique way of referring to this was the expression, "Reischauer historiography."

When he retired from the ambassadorship in 1966 and returned to his home base at Harvard, Reischauer began a new life as a Distinguished University Professor, free to follow his own schedule. In addition to extensive travel and Japan-related projects, he resumed his teaching, introduced several new courses on East Asia, and again taught his well-known "Rice Paddies" course. His symbolic last lecture in that course was presented in April 1981 to an overflow audience. He received a standing ovation.

The BIJ syndrome had led Edwin Reischauer to a variety of endeavors. At one extreme was the life of the diplomat seeking to change national opinion and, at the other, the life of the scholar engaging in intellectual discourse with his peers. There are few who manage so successfully to fulfill even a single mission in life. Now it is intriguing to reflect on how he, with his many achievements, will be remembered. Will it be as Ambassador Reischauer, the unique scholar-Ambassador, or will it be as the Harvard writer and teacher, touching the lives of generations of students? Or will he be remembered most for the institutions to which he contributed, symbolized in the end by the Reischauer Institute? Whatever the answer, we will not find again in any such endeavors a successor of equal stature.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021911800046453 Published online by Cambridge University Press