

[Gateway](#)[Yosha Bunko](#)[News Nishikie](#)[Steamy East](#)[Konketsuji](#)[Wetherall](#)[About](#)[Contact](#)

The Yap island controversy

How Japan gained submarine cable sovereignty in the Pacific

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The Yap Island Controversy

in History 185B, February 1968 (Winter Quarter 1968), instructor Harry Harootunian

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[The Yap Island Controversy](#) [2017 preface](#) | [Abstract](#) | [The Yap Island Controversy](#) | [Map](#) | [References and Notes](#)

The Yap Island Controversy

2017 preface

This paper is undoubtedly the clearest and most "practical" report I would write in college. It was for a course on Japanese history taught by Harry Harootunian, who was teaching at Cal that year as a visiting professor.

I forget the purpose of the paper -- the question Harootunian posed for us to answer in the form of a term report. I recall, though, that the teaching assistant who conducted the discussions in the section of the course to which I was assigned, and who read the papers and exams of the students in the section, when returning the paper to me, asked what prompted the topic -- he'd heard of Yap island but not the "controversy" I explored in my report. Most of the other students chose topics that allowed them to explore familiar and popular "intellectual" issues in recent Japanese history.

My report stood out as one that examined something tangible -- submarine cables in the new age of communications electronics. People talked about territory, immigration, and naval tonnage. But submarine cables? Through Yap island? Weren't there more vital issues -- like the "emperor system"? Not to this former electrical engineering major, recently transferred into the College of Letters and Science from the College of Engineering.

Luckily for me, the TA and Harootunian liked it. It got an A -- my grade in the class. The TA marked a few spelling and grammar errors, usage problems, and awkward constructions. He wrote comments like "significance?" and "when is when?" and "good" and "good and about time". His evaluation at the end reads like this.

The only question I raise is one of balance. You say that the controversy went beyond Yap island itself. Perhaps you should have spent more time developing this point -- especially bringing up other reasons for Japanese hostility to the United States.

This comment immediate followed my concluding sentence.

For the United States the controversy was just another blemish on the face of an Asian policy that had degenerated into a dermatological problem of international scope.

The "dermatological problem" was a metaphor I adopted from my work as a medic, ambulance driver, and hospital laboratory technician in the U.S. Army, during the early years of the Vietnam War, between my engineering and humanities studies. In my cynical view of the human conditon, inspired by the Cuban Crisis and *Silent Spring*, aggressive industrialized civilizations were "plagues" that spread pathogens around the world. Nationalisms created all manner of dermatological eruptions on the skin of humanity.

The TA's postscript remark I have never forgotten.

"Proximal" seems to be your big word -- why?

Why indeed.

Abiko

10 April 2017

[Top](#)

ABSTRACT

The Yap Island Controversy was one of those historical events that is typically discarded by the historian when it becomes necessary to limit a general history text of moderate size to the pinnacle events. The controversy has been selected as a topic, however, by way of which the dissonance that served to betray latent Japanese-American tensions following World War I might be effectively portrayed. Other events could have been selected to portray as much, but what is unique about the Yap Island Controversy is that it was almost purely an American-Japanese affair whereas other obstructions to Japanese activities in Asia were sponsored by the European nations as well. It is true that Japan had the nominal backing of her Secret Treaty partners in connection with the disposition of Yap and its cables, but this factor seems to have been as unimportant as the island and its cables. What is believed to have been of ultimate importance in the

Yap Island Controversy was Japan's display of her readiness to face the United States as an unmitigated equal in the Pacific arena.

[Top](#)

THE YAP ISLAND CONTROVERSY

It is probable that Japanese-American relations have never been so complex as during the years surrounding World War I. This was the period when Japan was emerging as a principal World power; when European energies were being all but consumed in a war from which Japan was in a position to draw only strength; when racial discrimination against Japanese in the United States was increasing in severity; when the Siberian Expeditionary Forces (Japanese dominated and endorsed only reluctantly by the United States) were becoming at loggerheads; [[awk "stalelated?"](#)] when Pacific naval rivalry was moving menacingly ahead; ad infinitum. American-British relations were deteriorating over several critical issues; China was looking to the United States as the only Occidental country sporting [[having](#)] a nominal moral interest in Chinese national integrity; and the United States, having refused to ratify the Versailles Peace Treaty or the League of Nations Covenant, was pursuing an Asian policy most notable for its lack of consistency, on the one hand ethnocentric in the classical European fashion, on the otherhand [[sic = other hand](#)] strikingly international, a veritable political mares-nest uneuphemistically contrived to stem what the Occidental mind believed to be a 'yellow-peril' [[awk.](#)] It was in connection with these developments that President Wilson, among others, first heard of the Island of Yap. [Note 1]

Yap was Spanish dominated (as were most of the South West Pacific islands) until the Spanish-American War. Because Spain had surrendered her principal Pacific holdings, the Philippines and Guam, to the United States in 1898, she no longer had an imperial need for the minor islands, and consequently Yap was sold, with other Spanish Pacific islands, to Germany in 1899. Germany, her imperial maw momentarily satiated, began to develop [[develop](#)] her Pacific communications, often in co-operation with the Dutch. In 1906 the German-Netherlands Telegraph Company laid submarine cables from Yap to Menado (Cerebes), Guam, and Woosung (proximal to Shanghai), and in 1912 the German South Sea Wireless Telegraph Company began to operate a radio station on the island. [Note 2] Consequently Yap represented the hub of German Pacific communications until 1914 when in connection with World War I and agreements made with the European Allies, Japan occupied the German islands, at which time Yap became an integral part of Japanese communications in the Pacific.

In 1917 via secret treaties with the European [[European](#)] Allies Japan secured recognition of her occupation of the former German islands north of the Equator, and at the Versailles Peace Conference she persisted to claim complete annexation of the islands. The Peace Conference, however, introduced a new terminology, that of the mandate, and via the League of Nations it was agreed upon that Japan would administer

the islands under the auspices of an International Mandatory. The islands, including Yap, were termed Class "C" Mandates, and consequently Yap became not a possession as such but the nearest approach to it among the three classes of mandate. That the Mandate System was politically a new form of territorial distribution among the imperialistic powers was made fully evident when in 1937 Japan withdrew from the League of Nations but was permitted to retain her Pacific mandate. [Note 3]

The Yap Island Controversy began when [When is when?] the United States decided she had a strategic interest in the former German cables (the nominal interest), and the objective of the United States became at minimum the prevention of Japanese control of the cables (the nominal intent). This meant challenging Japanese interests in Yap, which proved to be difficult for several reasons:

(1) Japanese-American communications in connection with Yap had been informal at best and otherwise off-the-record until after 7 May, 1919, on which date the Council of Four, with President Wilson participating, mandated the German islands to Japan without reservations; there was no indication, according to the minutes of the meeting, that the United States had any special interests in Yap, which proved technically embarrassing to the United States when at the Washington Conference (1921-1922) Yap and its cables became an issue resolved essentially in favor of Japan. [Note 4]

(2) Of the Allied and Associated Powers only the United States and the Dutch had any obvious national interests in the Yap cables, whereas Britain and France (and secondarily Russia and Italy) were in the position of having guaranteed Japanese Pacific claims via the Secret Treaties concluded in 1917 before the United States had formally declared war on Germany. Evidently the United States first became aware of these treaties only at which time they were disclosed by the Bolsheviks when the Tzar [Tzarist] files were opened during the Russian Revolution.

(3) The United States was being viewed by Japan, a ratifier of the Versailles Treaty and a member at the time of the League of Nations, as a virtual outlaw in connection with the adamant position the United States was fostering in connection with the disposition of the Mandate Islands. An observation by a Japanese commentator illustrates the Japanese sensitivity to this adamancy:

"America may have the ambition of forming the center of the

World's communication, and she may intend to obstruct the Japanese mandatory rule of the South Seas in order to meet the convenience of Hawaii and other islands belonging to herself. She refuses to ratify the Peace Treaty and the League of Nations Covenant, yet she speaks as if she were a member of the League, and tries to repudiate its decisions, basing her claims on the statements of her own President without any corroboration in the records of the League's proceedings."

[Note 5]

(4) Perhaps the most intransigent barrier of all was the incredible position the United States was fostering in connection with American rights in the Pacific versus Japanese rights there. In essence this was the position which so enticed the Japanese, who were quick to observe American possession of the Philippines, Guam, Midway, Wake, and Hawaii, and who were as quick to argue that if the United States could have a Monroe Doctrine, so could Japan.

At the time of the Yap Island Controversy the United States owned the only true trans-Pacific cable in existence [sic = existence], [Note 6] and furthermore enjoyed control over all relay stations between the Seattle and Woosung landings: at Honolulu, Midway, Guam, and the Philippines. Only the Woosung landing was nominally on foreign soil, giving the United States a relatively secure communicative tie with the Orient. Why, therefore, the rather sudden interest in Yap? To suggest that American interests in Yap ultimately transcended material interests in the island or its cables requires that the probability of a serious material interest existing be made to appear small enough so as to favor the ruling out of a material interest in connection with United States pursuits in the controversy. [Awk] Consequently it is somewhat necessary to have an understanding of the disposition of international cable systems proximal [proximal] to 1920.

The submarine cable was the principal World communicative medium of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At the time of World War I wireless communication was at best in its infancy. For military purposes early wireless was less than desirable [sic = desirable] for reasons of security: it was difficult to confine transmissions to narrow sectors, and therefore early wireless was subject to indiscriminate monitoring; and for reasons of reliability: the nature of early wireless made transmissions easily susceptible of jamming (the concept of electronic countermeasures was then a Jules Verne anticipation, not a Space Age reality). Naturally governments having jurisdiction over the shore on which a cable relay station was located exercised rights of sovereignty; [Good] firstly, as to the conditions under which the cable landing license was procured [sic = procured]; and secondly, as to what was best for its own public and commercial interests,

especially in times of stress or war. The cable-end in a country could not be under foreign control without the friction of extraterritoriality, and no strong government was likely to grant another government extraterritorial privileges. [Note 7]

Because submarine cable development tended to follow trade, at the turn of the century the bulk of the World's cable systems had been British laid, British owned, and British controlled. European government cables generally serviced only colonial regions, and the major international trunk lines and facilities were privately owned. Most Asian countries were under colonial or quasi-colonial rule, but with those few that were strong enough to maintain their independence, cable ownership was invariably governmental. Of the privately owned cables serving the World at the time of World War I: 135,850 nautical miles (308 cables) were British owned; 73,500 nautical miles (99 Cables) were American owned; 18,000 nautical miles (29 cables) were French owned; and all other private cables totaling 8,500 nautical miles (31 cables). [Note 8]

The Japanese government administered 209 cables totaling 5,800 nautical miles as the Internal System of Japan. The International System of Japan (not including the Yap cables) was made up of 5 cables with points in China, totaling 2000 nautical miles, giving Japan 214 submarine cables totaling 7,800 nautical miles at the time of World War I. [Note 9] The large number of cables was due to the insular geography which characterized Japan and to the number of river estuaries which had to be traversed, particularly on the Pacific seaboard of Honshū.

In terms of government owned cables Japan was the first ranking cable concern in Asia. The second ranking concern was Dutch East India with 6,850 nautical miles (34 cables) and the third ranking concern was British India with 2,350 nautical miles (14 cables). The other Asian concerns, including China, French-Indo China, and the Philippine Islands, owned fewer than 1000 nautical miles of submarine cable each. [Note 10]

Another measure of cable potential is the number of cable laying and repairing vessels that represent the various countries. In 1921 there were 51 such vessels (15 government owned and 36 privately owned) of which 30 were British, 9 American, 3 French, 3 Danish, 2 German, 2 Japanese, and one each Italian and Dutch. [Note 11]

The Yap cables totaled 3,400 nautical miles, which in relation to Japan's cable development represented a significant gain in a material as well as strategic sense. In the process of occupying the German Pacific islands. Japan cut the Yap cables in the vicinities of their distal landings, that is, near Menado, Guam, and Woosung, The Woosung cable was diverted to the Naha (Okinawa) relay station which was in turn linked with Tamsui (proximal to Taipei) and Kagoshima (Kyūshū). [Note 12] Other principal Japanese cables were two from Tōkyō to Taiwan and one from Tōkyō to Ogasawara (Bonin) which was in turn linked with the American network at Guam.

What was unique about the status of the Japanese cable system in 1920 (including the Yap-Okinawa connection) is that it constituted a militarily secure communications

network, that is, a cable system under the absolute control of the Japanese government. [Good] In strategic terms the Japanese cable system was clearly superior to the American system. Other than the trans-Pacific cable already mentioned, the principal cables servicing the American public were landed in Canada (having had their origins in Europe) and tied to the United States via land lines. In 1920 no less than 17 cables linked the European Continent with the Western Hemisphere but of these only one was not subject to British control at either end, this being a French cable from Brest to Cape Cod. All other 16 cables had landings on British dominated soil. [Note 13] What cables had directly linked the United States with Germany had been destroyed at their European landings. Throughout the war the United States government was at the mercy of censorship imposed by the European Allies upon news, intelligence, and other vital communications relating to the war, a manifestation which did not fail to awaken the United States from its traditional slumber in connection with the importance of international submarine cables. With the exception of being interested in low cable tolls, the United States government apparently failed to concern itself intelligently with the question of cables in international communication until so constrained by the realities of war.

From this sketch of the disposition of international cable systems proximal to 1920 it seems improbable that the United States was prompted to pursue restrictions against Japan in connection with the Yap Mandatory in order to deploy the Yap cables for American strategic purposes. The United States could have layed [sic = laid] her own cables wherever she wished, and for that matter so could have Japan (though with less technological and economic ease) had the United States been successful in effecting the desired Yap restrictions. Yap was not a potential source of raw materials for mineral deficient Japan, and consequently as real estate Yap was unimportant . . . except as it might be thought of as one of the larger populated rock-outcroppings from which Japan might conceivably interfere with communications between Guam and the Philippines in the event of war. [Good -- and about time.]

The Yap Island Controversy seems not to have had anything ultimately to do with cables or real estate but rather probably stemmed from the growing distrust between the United States and Japan (mainly as the former was nourishing a distrust for the latter; Japan had traditionally distrusted the United States and the European countries generally in connection with their presumed imperialistic designs in connection with Asia). The failure of the United States to gain any remarkable extranational [extra-national] support for her Yap policy was not merely the result of the beforementioned [before-mentioned] political ties between Japan and the European Allies in connection with Yap, but was as significantly the result of Japan's decision not to back down on the issue for ideological reasons. Japan had emerged as a global power, and had even dared to demand European recognition of Asian racial equality via the League of Nations. Certainly it must also have given the Japanese an immeasurable spiritual uplift to have been a vital [vital?] partner in the Allied offensive of the World War, and to have been guaranteed a

voice at the Peace Conference and a seat at the League of Nations.

The United States, on the otherhand [sic = other hand], had reluctantly entered the war, had refused to ratify either the Peace Treaty or the League Covenant, and was bucking every international consensus in connection with the rather obvious ideological discontinuities between American Asian economic policy and American domestic racial policy (probably these two policies were more intimately related than syntax here would indicate). Japan saw clearly that the United States could be defeated before the World court, as it were, ironically in terms of the logic 'inherent' in American Idealism. That President Wilson questioned the Yap Mandate apparently as an afterthought of his Department of State would indicate that the United States was anxious to create some point of conflict between herself and Japan for the sake of drawing World attention to the supposition that Japan posed a threat to Western dominance in Asia. Possibly the resultant isolationist policies pursued by the United States stemmed from an inability to reconcile American Philosophical ambivalency: the advocacy of national freedom on the one hand but on the otherhand [sic = other hand] the concurrent pursuit of restrictions against Japan in every way thought feasible; the enforcement of the Monroe Doctrine for the Western Hemisphere while concurrently refusing to admit that Japan had an equal right to pursue an equivalent policy in Asia; the support of Japanese-Chinese efforts to gain World recognition for Asians as racial equals of Europeans while concurrently denying American citizenship privileges to Asians and masklessly [masklessly] discriminating against Japanese in particular . . . these were the major ambivalencies.

The Yap Island Controversy seems not to have really been a confrontation about a small island which few persons in the World had ever heard of. The data shows that the game was being called in rather superficial terms. Supposedly the cables were important, and so they undoubtedly were to a point, but not ultimately; presumably Japan was in need of mineral ores and petroleum sources to develop [develop], not more people to govern, and the only notable resources on Yap were its few thousand Yapese.

The only really important feature about Yap that might have caused the island to be central to a confrontation between Japan and the United States was the fact that it was a Pacific Island. The Japanese protested when the United States annexed Hawaii in 1898 but were too weak to prevent the act. Since that incident both the Russo-Japanese War and World War I had occurred with one consequence that Japan had learned to stand straight; the Yap Island Controversy was one of the first manifestations of this straightness. For the United States the controversy was just another blemish on the face of an Asian policy that has degenerated into a dermatological [dermatological] problem of international scope.

Top

Map

Submarine cables through Yap island circa 1924-1940

Grading



Map showing submarine cables through Yap island circa 1924-1940

William Wetherall, "The Yap Island Controversy

Page 13 of 14-page report, **History 185B**, Winter Quarter 1968, Harry Harootunian

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Top

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Top

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