The United States in East Asia and the
*Japan Advertiser* network, 1911–1936

B. W. (Benjamin Wilfrid) Fleisher (1870–1946), owner and publisher of the *Japan Advertiser* from 1908 to 1940, came to East Asia ‘only by chance, and stayed because it offered him relief from the pressures and failures that had overwhelmed him at home’. Fleisher was the son of Simon B. Fleisher, founder of the Fleisher Yarn Co. of Philadelphia. The Fleishers were Jews with origins in Germany, a fact frequently noted at the British Foreign Office and at the Foreign Ministry of Japan, as well as by Ugaki Kazushige in 1923. The Fleishers’ ancestry would also be raised in the mid-1930s when Nazis at the German embassy in Tokyo began winking out potential impediments to cooperation between Germany and Japan.

After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania in the 1880s, Fleisher joined the family business. In 1907, aged thirty-seven, following parental fury over losses of around $1 million on the stock market, he suffered a nervous breakdown. To help his recovery, Fleisher went on a world cruise. When Fleisher arrived in Yokohama in the autumn of 1907, there were five English-language newspapers in business but none of them struck Fleisher as real carriers of news. He abandoned his cruise and stayed on in the port in the hope of developing such a newspaper. There, he crossed paths with John Russell Kennedy, who became an early mentor. In 1908 Kennedy got Fleisher a job at $25 a month, selling advertising space and reporting for the *Japan Advertiser*, then owned by a journalist named Arthur May Knapp. Instead of picking up gossip and contacts at the club bar, Fleisher surprised his colleagues by going out in search of news and advertisers. At the end of his first month, Fleisher’s advertising commissions were so high that Knapp promoted him to advertising manager and shortly thereafter business manager, at a salary of $175 but removed his commission.

However, Fleisher’s ambitions were not satisfied. In 1908 he mounted a takeover bid for the *Advertiser* and with the help of Kennedy, who owned shares himself and knew the other shareholders, gained a controlling stake, for either $15,000 or $30,000. Thus began Fleisher’s proprietorship of the treaty port rag he would turn into one of the best edited and best connected American newspapers in East Asia.

In 1911 Fleisher took on further responsibilities, becoming business manager for a new publication in Shanghai, the veteran US journalist
Thomas Millard’s *China Press* (see below). In 1913 Fleisher moved the *Advertiser* business to Tokyo. In 1914 after struggling with a high editorial staff turnover, he reached an arrangement with Walter Williams, Dean of the School of Journalism at the University of Missouri, whereby Williams would recommend Missouri graduates to join the *Advertiser* in Tokyo.

In 1914 Fleisher hired Hugh Byas as editor of the *Advertiser*. Born in Scotland in 1875, Hugh Byas had worked in the Dominions press, on the *Rand Daily Mail* in Johannesburg for seven years from 1902. In 1909 he had joined the staff of *The Times* in London.7 Byas proved a capable editor; hard working, fair-minded, a gifted observer, a fastidious researcher, and an assiduous and discreet accumulator of Japanese contacts. Not only did he attract a supportive Japanese network for the *Advertiser*, but he consistently sought out and published original pieces by Japanese journalists writing in English. As editor, 1914–16, 1918–22 and 1926–30, when he left to concentrate on the Tokyo correspondence of *The Times* and *New York Times*, in which capacity he succeeded Fleisher’s son, Wilfrid,8 Byas brought editorial flair and consistency to the *Advertiser*, while in the long term his proprietor’s cautious attitude to the reporting of East Asian affairs in Japan won the paper the authority and balance of the middle ground.9

By now, the *Advertiser* had begun to share in Japan’s wartime prosperity. The daily edition went from three or four pages to eighteen and thirty-two pages on Sunday, packed with advertisements. Now fully settled with his wife and children in Tokyo in a house near the US embassy, Fleisher invested in production and editorial staff, both Japanese and American, built up a pool of translators to bring the *Advertiser* the best of the vernacular press, and sent correspondents to Washington, London, Peking, Shanghai and Manila. In 1911 the *Advertiser* became the first foreign newspaper in Japan to receive cabled news reports from abroad: swelling from about twenty words daily to include wires from all the main American and European news agencies, while its rivals, including the *Chronicle*, still relied on Reuters telegrams. Fleisher imported the most up-to-date printing plant in post-war Tokyo, took the *New York Times* as his typographic model, and set up the Advertiser Press to utilize spare capacity.10

Besides his managerial oversight in Japan, Fleisher worked hard at an official and commercial level to build the *Advertiser’s* international reputation. Fleisher developed a flair for organizing special issues of the *Advertiser*, such as the Panama-Pacific Exposition number marking the opening of the Panama Canal in 1915, for which he garnered endorsements from Woodrow Wilson, Ōkuma Shigenobu, and Katō Takaaki, numerous motoring supplements, and the 1928 Enthronement issue (see below). Over the years, Fleisher founded or participated in numerous goodwill missions between Japan and the United States. In November 1916 Fleisher began soliciting interest for a new monthly magazine, *America-Japan*. He addressed the Secretary of State in