My route into Asian studies is about as normal as it would have been unpredictable beforehand. As a third-generation American—all of my grandparents were immigrants from Eastern Europe in the second decade of the twentieth century—I was neither the first person in my family to get a B.A. nor even a Ph.D. I was, however, the first person to become interested in the history and culture of East Asia. Because there was such a bookish culture in my family, though, it was never seen as an unusual pursuit; in fact, I'm certain that my lefty parents were thrilled that one of theirs was studying China, given what was for them the exciting events in the years immediately preceding my birth in 1950. In fact, many people have commented (and occasionally reached some far-fetched conclusions) about the natural ties between Chinese and Jews. I personally don't buy any of it, though of course I respect their right to have silly views.

Although born in Brooklyn, New York, I grew up from age seven in Berkeley, California precisely in those now famous years of political turmoil and excitement. Mine was a politically active, left-of-center family, and that meant countless marches and rallies for the important causes of the day: the civil rights movement, the movement in opposition to the American war in Viet Nam War, and many spin-offs of both. I spent my college years at the University of Chicago (1968–1972), continuing in those same activities and there developing a keen interest in modern China.

At the University of Chicago, I studied first with the late Professor Tang Tsou in the political science department and later with Philip Kuhn and Akira Iriye in history. In 1972 I entered graduate school at Columbia University where I initially studied with C. Martin Wilbur and, upon his retirement, with Wm. Theodore de Bary. During those years, I studied Chinese (from 1970) and then Japanese (from 1973) relentlessly, day and night. Americans were unable to study in China throughout most of the 1970s, so that was still a romantic, though never actually a practical, desideratum. Columbia had a rather draconian language requirement (long since watered down), and thus I had taken the equivalent of a fair number of years of both Chinese and Japanese language (including summers) by the time I was searching for a thesis topic.

I forget who first suggested the topic of Naitō Konan (1866–1934), the great Japanese Sinologist, but I jumped at the suggestion. The next thing I knew I
was reading my first book in Japanese, cover to cover, a biography of Naitō by one of his last students, Mitamura Taisuke of Ritsumeikan University. And, in late 1976 I was off on my first trip to Asia with support from the Fulbright Foundation and later from the Japanese Ministry of Education. I spent roughly eighteen months at Kyoto University, where Naitō had pioneered Chinese studies at the beginning of the twentieth century, reading through his works, soaking up as much of the Sinological world of Kyoto University as possible, and interviewing Naitō's last students. I also made some of my best friends among the students of that generation in Kyoto at the time.

Historical studies were in those days largely compartmentalized by nations. The idea of crossing borders and working on more than one national entity at the same time was not frowned upon, but it was not exactly encouraged either—anywhere in the world. Diplomatic historians at least paid lip service to working in multiple archives and multiple languages, but in reality few historians, diplomatic or otherwise, working in the West were actually doing that. Professor Iriye was one of those few and a great inspiration to me.

Many times over the years I have been asked, in East Asia as well as the West, if I am first and foremost a historian of China or Japan. The answer I like to give—and usually do—is that I don't make that distinction. I explain that I pick topics that cross the Sino-Japanese border and go where the research necessitates I go. We now have the language of “border-crossing” and “global studies” and even “globalization,” but that is a relative recent addition to the historian's lexicon.

But, once I sensed the wealth of fascinating but still unstudied topics in Sino-Japanese interactions, I was an immediate convert. Subsequent research topics and books included: the life and work of a Japanese expatriate in China (Nakae Ushikichi, 1889–1942); Japanese travel writings about China (1862–1945); the Japanese community of Shanghai; Japanese historiography (1784–present) concerning the gold seal presented by the founding emperor of the Later Han dynasty in 57 CE to an emissary from somewhere in that space we now call Japan and soon lost before being found in the late eighteenth century; and most recently, the voyage of the Senzaimaru in 1862 and the restarting of Sino-Japanese diplomatic and commercial relations in the modern era. Many run-ups to and spin-offs from these (and other) projects are represented in the essays that follow in this collection.

In 1988 I called together a small group which met in my hotel room at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, and we formed the Sino-Japanese Studies Group. There were only about fifteen of us at the time—Sherman Cochran reassured me that there were fewer participants at the first national congress of the Chinese Communist Party—and we weren't exactly