Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975) and Japan: From Historian to Guru

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INTRODUCTION

When I joined the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) as a young researcher in 1973, I would occasionally see the distinguished, ageing figure of Arnold Toynbee making his way to and from the office that he still had there, some fifty years after his first involvement with the Institute. When he died in 1975 I mostly knew of him as the author of *A Study of History*, a massive eleven volume work.

Later when I worked alongside the first wave of Japanese fellows who started to come to Chatham House from about 1976 I learnt of Toynbee's stellar reputation in Japan. How did a British historian, educated pre-1914 and schooled in Greco-Roman history, end his life as a cult figure in Japan, a country which he had only visited three times – in 1929, 1956 and 1967?

After rejecting a conventional academic career, he was recruited in 1924 by what was then the British Institute of International Affairs.
where he proved to be a brilliant, policy-oriented, contemporary historian. The Institute asked him to write annual surveys of world events for prompt publication. His first Survey covering the years 1920–3 came out in 1925, and was succeeded by a series of increasingly substantial volumes, each dealing with events in one year, generally being published within the next twelve months.

From 1934, he added to his work load by bringing out the first volumes of what became the multi-volume project called *The Study of History* (the last volume of reflections coming out in 1961). In this, he developed theories about the rise and fall of civilizations, going back in history at least 5000 years, and analysing the fate of over thirty such entities. Although this project is now generally judged to have been badly flawed, these volumes showed vast erudition.

Finally, he became a globally-known public figure. In 1942 he had visited New York, where he had met Henry Luce, the publisher of *Time, Life* and *Fortune*. Five years later, the abbreviated edition of his first six volumes was published in the United States in the same month that President Truman announced America’s leadership of the Free World in the struggle against communism. Toynbee’s work seemed to be offering an authoritative, alternative non-Marxist analysis of the world system: so Toynbee was put on the cover of *Time Magazine* as the ideological bedrock of the emerging Free World.

His books sold massively. He became a staple on the lecture circuit, and he gradually became less of an analyst and more of a prophet.

One by-product of this American success was that his work became known in Japan, though it would take nearly twenty years before his fame really took off there.

THE ANNUAL SURVEYS OF INTERNATIONAL SURVEY

Toynbee became before the Second World War probably the leading observer of contemporary international history. Unusually for a Briton, he felt no need to put the British Empire to the fore of his analysis.

Thanks to a spell in the Foreign Office during the First World War and his involvement with the Versailles Peace Treaty negotiations, he started his annual *Survey* work with a clear view of Japan’s place in the world system.

The first *Survey* which he wrote covered world affairs in the years of 1920–3. In this, he analysed Japan’s position as the new predominant power in the Far East, but warned that Japan was at a potential turning point: ‘The signature of the Treaty at Versailles on the 28th of June 1919 marked the climax of Japan’s fortunes during these years . . . as the new predominant Power in the Far East, she had acquired a unique position in the field where the main currents of world politics