

LOOKING EAST: MORE THAN A VISION

“The East is a career.”

—Benjamin Disraeli

Looking East: William Howard Taft and the 1905 U. S. Diplomatic Mission to Asia: The Photographs of Harry Fowler Woods by Margo Taft Stever, James Taft Stever, and Hong Shen. Edited by Kevin Grace. Wilmington, Ohio: Orange Frazer P, 2015. ISBN 978-1-939710-22-2. 291 pp. \$39.95, cloth.

China, with more than one billion residents, stands at the precipice of being considered a world super-power, on par with the likes of the United States and Europe. The nation manufactures many of the goods people throughout the world take for granted. Japan was for many years, and remains, an economic force, producing high-end electronics, automobiles, and cultural content enjoyed globally. South Korea is home to electronics maker Samsung, whose cell phones, televisions and tablets help power homes and businesses everywhere. For those wondering about the ubiquity of labels like *Made in China*, *Made in South Korea*, and *Made in Vietnam* among others, *Looking East: William Howard Taft and the 1905 U. S. Diplomatic Mission to Asia* will be able to provide a great deal of context in answering some of those questions. The authors, two of whom are Taft’s collateral descendants and direct descendants of photographer and businessman, Harry Fowler Woods, catalog Taft’s efforts in building diplomatic and trade ties with the Asian continent. Then U. S. Secretary of War in President Theodore Roosevelt’s administration, William Howard Taft’s work builds in part on that of U. S. Secretary of State John Hay, who in 1899, penned the *Open Door Note* to China in an effort to make the nation more amenable to trade with the United States.

This volume is complete with maps of Asia in the cover pages, indices, and iconic photographs by Harry Fowler Woods. Woods’s photographs are historically important for research and study to both scholars and students, documenting a single but significant event in history of the Taft delegation’s diplomatic visit to China and other Asian countries. Now that Asia possesses a greater deal of economic and military strength, chiefly on the part of China, *Looking East* can provide some important historical context for the present complexities facing Asia, the United States and the world at large.

The first chapter of *Looking East* establishes several significant goings-on of 1905. Among these events is Japan’s victory in the Rus-

so-Japanese War and China's successful boycott of American products, which was meant to bring attention to the poor treatment of Chinese immigrants in the United States. These were but two events that put the West on notice that Asia was far from weak or backward in its thinking. The following illustrates some of the United States' views on Asia, particularly, the Philippines: "In 1905, the United States engaged in a continuing, costly, and ultimately futile struggle with an insurgency in the Philippines in an effort to legitimize its civilizing mission and administrative colonial foothold in Asia" (3).

Asia, like much of the rest of the non-Western world, often found its people, land and resources held at the mercy of Western interests. The boycott by China five years after the Boxer Rebellion served notice that the nation would not be beholden to these interests. In a sense, that action helped set the country on its current course as a powerful entity. For much of the twentieth century, negative views of Asia by the West held stubbornly. Taft's journey into Asia included luminaries such as Theodore Roosevelt's daughter, Alice, and a long-time member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Nicholas Longworth. Additionally, the retinue included twenty-three U. S. Congressmen, seven senators, and a host of businessmen and their families (3). *Looking East* touches on the optics of Taft's diplomatic mission, as well as the all-important motivations behind it:

In order to further understand why the *S. S. Manchuria*, peopled with Caucasian, Anglo-Saxon male politicians...felt empowered to cross the ocean to far-flung parts of the globe on what was widely viewed back home as a good-will trip, it is necessary to explore the unprecedented rise of the United States of America in the nineteenth century from a collection of "neo-European settler societies" in a vast wilderness to a position of near-global dominance resulting from a fast-developing industrializing society. (13)

The Stevers recognize the symbolism of this mainly white delegation set against the backdrop of a new and exotic locale, but still peppered with long-standing, Western colonial strongholds throughout. Ostensibly, one would conclude then that those strongholds would only be made firmer by the intention to expand American economic and political interests into the region. As such, the mission was meant in part to assist in the Russo-Japanese peace negotiations, showcase achievements in the Philippines, and strengthen the fragile "Open Door" policy in China (13). The chapter goes on to document, with brilliant photographs throughout, other journeys across Asia by Taft and his delegation.

Looking East is one of the most intriguing volumes to come along in a while to objectively frame some of the origins of East-West relations and how they reflect on our present-day, heavily connected culture. As political, economic, and cultural upheaval throughout Asia now has the power to cause waves throughout the industrialized world, it is important to understand how the West and Asia came to this point in history.

The epigraph by British author, Benjamin Disraeli, is perfectly apt where *Looking East* is concerned. Taft, for better or worse, built a great part of his own career on his 1905 diplomatic mission to Asia. It has helped to give us a world whose borders can disappear with the light-speed movement of information and ideas across the digital landscape. Eastern and Western cultures now have the ability to more easily merge and re-emerge as something new. Still, traditions and suspicions deeply held by those in the East and the West often present speed bumps that threaten to hinder greater ties and harm those who are nearly powerless in the face of this ongoing growth. In any case, Taft was helpful in cutting a path throughout the world with the equal connective capabilities of the ancient Roman roads and the Silk Road.

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