

Choosing Values: Toward an Ethical Framework in the Study of History

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WHEN I ASK MY STUDENTS on the first day of class, “why study history?” one of the first responses is, “to not repeat the mistakes of the past.” I doubt many of my community college students are familiar with the philosopher George Santayana, but they have internalized his famous saying, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” I probe further. “What is a mistake in history? Can you name any?” Compelled to view history as a series of grand collective experiments, some identify slavery and the Holocaust as major wrong turns. There are nods of agreement. Turning to American history, I ask about the Vietnam War and the more recent Iraq War. Opinions are more uncertain and divided. We explore the reasons why some consider these wars a mistake and others do not.

What impresses me about the discussion is that, irrespective of particular views, students assume that the study of history holds meaningful lessons for the present, if only to avoid the “mistakes” of the past. Questions of right and wrong are not taboo, but are catalysts for debate and learning. The historical profession as a whole seems much less certain of this approach. The adage often heard is

that historians should explain the past rather than judge it, allowing audiences to draw their own conclusions. Granted that one should not impose one's values on audiences, the idea that history can be taught without value judgments is fundamentally flawed.

Recognizing Values

The idea that historians should explain rather than judge history reflects a false dichotomy between two essential functions—analysis and evaluation. These functions are distinct but not antagonistic. One can and should do both when studying history. The integration of these functions can be seen in courts of law, which examine and analyze evidence prior to making a decision as to whether the accused has committed a crime. The idea that the past should be explained rather than judged furthermore assumes that values *can be* removed from history. This is an illusion. Values are intricately woven into every historical narrative, beginning with what is important and who is being studied. Notions of “progress” and “success” furthermore reveal underlying value-orientations. However respectful historians and teachers may be in allowing their audiences to grapple with varied historical evidence and multiple interpretations without imposing their own views, values guide the selection and interpretation of all historical data.¹

The question is not *whether* to incorporate values, but *which* values to incorporate. In any given society at any given time, different value-based interpretative schemas vie for influence, reflecting competing political persuasions, ideological viewpoints, and historical schools of thought. Dominant interpretive schemas, or consensus views, emerge from time to time, only to shift in response to new developments, changing social norms, and the outcome of scholarly debates. The past remains the same, but our thinking about it changes.

The history of U.S.-Native American relations is a case in point. During the nineteenth century, the prominent U.S. historians George Bancroft and Francis Parkman depicted Native Americans as an inferior race and an obstacle to the progress of civilization. This common Anglo/white view continued well into the twentieth century via Frederick Jackson Turner's “frontier thesis,” which described the western frontier as “an area of free land” and a “meeting point

between savagery and civilization.” In 1927, an eclectic group of Indian leaders issued a joint statement denouncing U.S. history books that portrayed Indians as “murderers” and calling attention to the many treaties broken by the U.S. government as well as the “beautiful” cultural expressions of Indian tribes. Such views remained outside the mainstream of the history profession for another generation, with the exception of the new field of Indian ethno-history. In the late 1960s, in the wake of the civil rights movement, a “new Indian history” emerged, aided by publications such as Vine Deloria Jr.’s *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969) and Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (1970). Written by Native Americans, these books inverted the Turner thesis, highlighting the savagery of Anglo American expansionists and the wisdom of Indian peoples. Both books became bestsellers—a measure of how times had changed. Some other historians took up this line as well, but most settled for the inclusion of Native American experiences and perspectives in their narratives. Today, virtually all U.S. schoolchildren learn about the “Trail of Tears,” the forced removal of the Cherokee and other Southeastern tribes in the 1830s, although differences remain among historians as to whether this episode is deemed a “tragedy,” a “betrayal,” or part of a Anglo-American genocidal mission.² Since the 1980s, historians and genocide scholars have documented many cases of massacres and genocidal policies toward particular Native American tribes. Benjamin Madley, writing in the *American Historical Review* (February 2015), provides a cogent summary of the state of the field along with two abbreviated case studies.³

The study of imperialism is another area that has changed with the times—and for the better. Most U.S. history textbooks today allow for the voices of the colonized to be heard, recognize the exploitive motives and self-righteous rationales of the colonizers, and judge certain historical episodes to be excessive in brutality; notably, the Atlantic slave trade and King Leopold’s imperial enterprise in the Congo. According to one world history textbook, “Leopold’s brutalities were responsible for the deaths of millions and were, as contemporary African American historian George Washington Williams put it, a ‘crime against humanity.’”⁴ The fact that Williams is quoted here says more about our values today than the mindset of the past, as Williams was a voice in the wilderness in his own time.

His open letter to King Leopold in 1890, which condemned the heartless treatment of the Congolese, fell on deaf ears (it took another two decades before international pressure led the Belgian government to ban the practice of forced labor). Few Europeans or Americans in the early twentieth century could foresee the demise of imperialism and its racist underpinnings in the latter half of the century.

Challenging Nationalistic Bias

The civil rights revolution has had a profound effect on academia no less than the rest of American society. Multicultural values that eschew racial, gender, and other prejudices have been incorporated into the study of American history, opening the door to a fuller examination of slavery, oppression, and the contradictions of America's freedom-loving rhetoric. Traditionalists have responded with anger, appalled that American icons are being slighted and that the American reputation is being tarnished. In their view, the teaching of American history should instill pride and patriotism, celebrate American political institutions and the "benefits of the free enterprise system," and honor the nation's contributions to making the world freer and safer.

This celebratory nationalistic view has strong roots in popular political culture, but has met with some resistance in the history profession. "American history," writes Jon Butler, president of the Organization of American Historians, should be "honest to itself, not the Gods of the State, and to our future as a historically literate, thoughtful people."⁵

The nationalist framework is problematic because it conflates noble ideals and moral values with national identity, such that the nation is "understood" to be good and benevolent, irrespective of its actions and results.⁶ Nationalistic bias has both crude and sophisticated forms. The cruder version essentially replaces independent judgment with a "root for your team" mentality. Its celebratory histories are easily dismissed in academia for their historical inaccuracies. The more sophisticated version establishes an interpretive framework that views all historical developments through the eyes of national leaders, or one set of leaders, while giving little consideration or credence to dissenting domestic voices, the views of other nations, and international norms. The "realist" school adds a caveat by

claiming to reject moral concerns in favor of hard-nosed analyses of power. Yet choosing to ignore values does not make them go away and, in any case, most “realist” scholars, like military historians, attach themselves to one nation or another, thereby infusing their critiques with nationalistic preoccupations and biases.⁷

American history textbooks used in U.S. high school and community college survey courses generally embrace the aforementioned nationalistic framing. Most highlight the “the rise of American power” and omit serious evaluation of the *use* of that power, notwithstanding commentary on whether a war or foreign policy was “successful” in terms of national objectives. The parameters of debate are wide enough to allow for criticism, but such criticism rarely rises to the level of generalizations that would challenge nationalistic assumptions of American goodness. A case in point may be seen in the popular college textbook, *America: A Narrative History* (2013), by George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi. In describing the U.S.-directed coup in Guatemala in 1954, the authors briefly note that the U.S. “installed a new ruler in Guatemala who created a police state,” thus acknowledging a serious contradiction to stated U.S. principles. Yet they draw no lesson from this experience in assessing the Eisenhower presidency just a few pages later. Instead, the authors write that President Dwight Eisenhower “maintained the peace in the face of combustible global tensions. . . . For the most part, he acted with poise, restraint, and intelligence in managing an increasingly complex cold war that he predicted would last for decades.” The authors fail to point out in this overview that the “police state” in Guatemala lasted for decades, sparking a civil war that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands, and that the U.S. aided many other police states during the long Cold War, effectively undermining its moral claim to be leading the “free world.”⁸

The nationalist framing of history has come under sustained challenge from the progressive “revisionist” school of diplomatic historians. According to Thomas G. Paterson, “revisionists, more than others, have spotlighted the hypocrisy and immorality—and ultimate tragedy—of American foreign policy.”⁹ Over the last half-century, they have built a formidable library of scholarly studies assessing both the broad contours of U.S. foreign policy and particular wars, interventions, doctrines, and policies. Their challenge began in the early 1960s, when the “orthodox” nationalist school was dominant,

its views blending harmoniously with America's self-image as the defender of freedom in the Cold War. The feud continued through the 1980s, eventually settling into a truce of sorts in which all viewpoints were deemed acceptable, even if the debate remained unresolved. Another challenge to the nationalist school, milder in tone, has arisen from international history, a relatively new subfield that encourages American historians to "step outside the national box," in the words of Thomas Bender, and be "more open to interpretations of our history coming from historians and others beyond our borders."¹⁰

Toward an Ethical Framework

Recognizing that value-orientations are inherent in the study of history and that nationalist frameworks will not suffice as the basis for historical assessments, the question becomes, what values should underpin historical inquiry? What values should be used to determine right and wrong turns in history?

Alexander Karn, in "Toward a Philosophy of Holocaust Education: Teaching Values without Imposing Agendas" (*The History Teacher*, February 2012), makes a strong case that "teachers must challenge their students to receive their learning within an ethical framework, which means that educators must be ready to take their lesson plans outside the realm of moral and political neutrality." Karn does not actually identify or construct an ethical framework, but rather encourages a "line of questioning" that asks "students what values and what understandings of global responsibility ought to prevail in the wake of the Holocaust."¹¹

The study of the Holocaust is a good starting point for ascertaining a positive set of values. Holocaust education has reached deep into the mainstream of American culture, its lessons used to reinforce the nation's adopted multicultural ethos. The Florida Resource Manual on Holocaust Education for Grades 4-6, for example, states that "it is our responsibility to make children aware of the horrors that can accompany racism and intolerance of ethnic and religious differences" in order to "develop respect and appreciation for diversity and human rights." For more advanced students, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. outlines ten learning objectives, including one that warns against apathy in the face of injustice: "The Holocaust provides a context for

exploring the dangers of remaining silent, apathetic, and indifferent in the face of the oppression of others.”¹²

Holocaust studies and education are part of a network of value-based studies that include comparative genocide studies, peace and justice studies, and human rights studies. All of these interdisciplinary fields seek to cultivate a moral sensibility among students and citizens with regard to our collective life. The Villanova University Peace and Justice Studies program, for example, defines its mission as helping students to understand “the components of a moral and just society,” and to “reflect on the alternative models for socially responsible resolution of injustice and conflict.”¹³ These value-based studies embody a number of qualities that should be encouraged in historical studies, including a disposition toward justice, an empathy for others that cuts across time and space, and a personal interest in the outcome of struggles for human rights and a better world. Most importantly for our purposes here, they are rooted in a set of international agreements that constitute an ethical framework for international conduct. These agreements include:

- prohibitions against national aggression written into the charters of the United Nations (1945) and the Organization of American States (1948);
- the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, approved by the United Nations General Assembly on December 9, 1948;
- human rights guidelines set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 10, 1948, and nine subsequent binding human rights treaties;
- humanitarian laws governing the treatment of civilians and prisoners of war, via the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols;
- the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, which entered into force in 2002, its mandate being to investigate and prosecute individuals accused of genocide, crimes against humanity, or war crimes; and
- dozens of environmental protection treaties.

Apart from practical implementation, these international agreements serve as a set of global norms and standards by which

individuals may judge the conduct and progress of nations. Put another way, they allow for all nations to be judged by the same ethical standards. From a historical perspective, these agreements signify lessons learned from the past, enlightened attempts to not repeat the same “mistakes,” including two devastating world wars, the Holocaust, and the use of atomic weapons. They call for an end to “the scourge of war” and for all societies to recognize the dignity of each individual, regardless of caste, class, race, gender, and social position. According to the Human Security Report Project in 2010, some progress has been made in shifting “global norms”:

Today, the traditional benefits of conquest have not only largely disappeared but resorting to war as an instrument of statecraft is legally and normatively proscribed, except in self-defense or with the authorization of the UN Security Council. This shift in global norms is evident in the now-universal recognition of the illegitimacy of colonial conquest and the near-absence among national governments the world over of the sort of aggressive hypernationalism associated with German and Japanese Fascism prior to World War II.¹⁴

The United States, it should be noted, has been ambivalent toward the development of this international moral architecture, a situation that affects how the paradigm shift in global norms is perceived in American educational institutions. Although the U.S. played a leading role in the International Military Tribunals at Nuremberg and Tokyo after World War II, the Senate refused to ratify the genocide convention of 1948 amid fears that it would apply to racial oppression and lynching in the segregated South. Not until 1986 did the Senate ratify the convention, and only then after a nineteen-year lobbying campaign by Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin, who made over 3,200 speeches on the Senate floor in favor of it. Regarding the International Criminal Court (ICC), President Bill Clinton signed the Rome Statute on December 31, 2000, but President George W. Bush “suspended” Clinton’s signature (thereby negating it). The Bush administration furthermore requested immunity from ICC prosecution for U.S. soldiers and citizens. The U.S. has ratified only four of the nine international human rights treaties. The U.S. is one of only two nations (with Palau) that has not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Social conservatives opposed to equal rights laws and nationalists who believe that international treaties undermine U.S. sovereignty

have combined to prevent a floor vote in the Senate. The Senate did ratify the Convention against Torture in 1994, but key provisions have been ignored in the U.S. global War on Terror. A bipartisan Congressional panel concluded in its 577-page report, issued in April 2013, that the U.S. had “violated its international legal obligations by engineering ‘enforced disappearances’ and secret detentions,” and by conducting “brutal interrogations” that violated the international Convention against Torture.¹⁵

Teaching Strategies

The recognition that values are intrinsic to the study of history opens the door to asking value-based questions in the classroom. These may flow spontaneously or through structured discussions. In either case, viewpoints aired should have no bearing on grades—and students need to know this. In my U.S. history and “U.S. in the World” classes, I have structured many discussions around whether it is appropriate for the U.S. to go to war. I do not reveal my own views, even when asked.

For the Mexican War and the Philippines War, I set the stage with dramatic readings I have prepared for students based on actual debates in the Senate. I commission the classroom as the Senate chamber and ask the “senators” to vote on whether to go to war and to explain their reasons in writing. I offer an opportunity for students to share their views in class. For World War I and the Vietnam War, I begin with film clips and appoint students as advisers to the president. In all cases, I collect their papers and tally their views, reporting back the following class on whether we are going to war. I read some of the papers (without names), highlighting different arguments made in support or opposition to war, and re-engage students in the discussion. For the Vietnam War, I also show a short film clip on Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Beyond Vietnam” speech. That King came out against the war is unknown to many students who otherwise celebrate his civil rights leadership.¹⁶

Methods for critically assessing nationalistic framing and assumptions include analyzing U.S. doctrines, comparing U.S. stated ideals with actual practices, comparing the perspectives of different nations, and examining domestic debates and dissent. I do a bit of theater with the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine

(1904), which declared that the U.S. would henceforth play the role of “international policeman” in the Western Hemisphere in order to prevent “chronic wrongdoing.” I declare myself to be the policeman of the classroom and proceed to “arrest” a student for, say, wearing a shirt that is red, declaring that this constitutes “chronic wrongdoing.” I order the student out of the class (I have talked to him or her beforehand), but before he or she makes it to the door, I ask the class, “Why can’t I do this?” It usually takes some time to get to the essential ideas that there is no legal system or written laws to back up my policing role or my trumped up charges, and that “chronic wrongdoing” is so vague as to allow me to use it in whatever way I want. Returning to its use in history, I put a list of U.S. military interventions in the first one-third of the twentieth century, some of which upheld existing governments and some of which aided in their overthrow—an ironic role for a “policeman.”

The U.S.-Philippines War (1899-1902) is most appropriate for contrasting stated ideals and actual practices. Most students have little knowledge of the four-year war, as compared to the four-week Spanish American War, and this is a topic of discussion in itself. I use segments from the PBS film, *Crucible of Empire*; Mark Twain’s sardonic essay, “To the Person Sitting in Darkness” (1901); Rudyard Kipling’s imperialist poem, “The White Man’s Burden” (1899); and other sources to highlight the rancorous debate between expansionists and anti-imperialists at the time. As for comparing national perspectives, the War of 1812 offers an opportunity to compare American, Canadian, British, and Native American perspectives, both at the time and in the present, as well as the Democratic Republican-Federalist domestic debate. I recommend using my comprehensive website article on the War of 1812.¹⁷

With reference to global norms and institutions, I would suggest, at a minimum, providing information about developments in international law, peacemaking, human rights, and the evolution of humanistic norms, and encouraging student research into these areas. I would also suggest linking up with peace and human rights programs, whether on campus or not, as some students will likely find a connection to their idealism. Beyond this, I would encourage steps toward embracing a principled view of history, based on the aforementioned set of international agreements. Hence, in examining wars, students should be familiar with international law and use

it to assess the legitimacy of a war. Further research can be done to examine whether there were reasonable alternatives to war at the time. One model for this is Fredrik Logevall's *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*, which explores the diplomatic road not taken by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and concludes that the U.S.-Vietnam War was unnecessary and avoidable. As for the conduct of war, knowledge of international humanitarian law should precede a close inspection of the effects, side effects, and aftereffects of wars as experienced by soldiers and civilians. Metaphorically speaking, this inspection should be conducted by a neutral reporter rather than one embedded in the armed forces of one side or another. The casualties, destruction, and disruptions of life on all sides should be considered.

What is suggested in terms of teaching strategies is a two-part mission; on the one hand, to encourage knowledge and application of humanitarian values, especially as embodied in an international law; and on the other hand, to cultivate critical *evaluation* skills. The latter may be considered part of, or an extension of, critical thinking skills. Thus, in addition to analyzing evidence, weighing arguments, comparing interpretations, and reaching logical conclusions, students should develop a facility for assessing such weighty issues as whether wars are necessary and just, and what constitutes social progress. Such questions touch upon the most important lessons to be learned from history.

Notes

1. For an enlightening discussion on how values influence the selection and interpretation of all historical data, see Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).

2. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1921); and "Memorial and Recommendations of the Grand Council Fire of American Indians presented to the Hon. William Hale Thompson, Mayor of Chicago, December 1, 1927," in *Textbooks and the American Indian*, ed. Robert Custo and Jeanette Henry (San Francisco, CA: Indian Historian Press, 1970), 2-3. The three different views on Indian Removal may be found in Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and His Indian Wars* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), which regards removal as tragic but inevitable, thus mitigating human

responsibility; Daniel Blake Smith, *An American Betrayal: Cherokee Patriots and the Trail of Tears* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2011), which deems it a “betrayal”; and David E. Stannard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), which links it to genocidal motives and policies.

3. Benjamin Madley, “Reexamining the American Genocide Debate: Meaning, Historiography, and New Methods,” *American Historical Review* 120, no. 1 (February 2015).

4. Robert R. Edgar, et al., *Civilizations Past & Present* (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2008), 751. See also Robert W. Strayer, *Ways of the World: A Brief Global History* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009), esp. p. 599.

5. Jon Butler, “It’s Hard to Protect the Gods of the State,” *The American Historian*, May 2015, p. 2. See also, Andrew Hartman, “The Internationalization of the U.S. History Curriculum—and Its Discontents,” *The American Historian*, February 2015, p. 41.

6. On the conflation of national identity and idealism, see Walter L. Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

7. An example of the nationalist-realist approach may be seen in Melvyn P. Leffler and Jeffrey W. Legro, eds., *To Lead the World: American Strategy after the Bush Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). The authors are in full agreement that the U.S. should lead the world. On the theory of realism, see Cynthia Weber, *International Relations Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

8. George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi, *America: A Narrative History, Volume Two* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2013), 1285-1286, 1297. See also, Elisabeth Malkin, “An Apology for a Guatemalan Coup, 57 Years Later,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/21/world/americas/an-apology-for-a-guatemalan-coup-57-years-later.html?_r=0>. On U.S. support for repressive regimes during the Cold War, see Jeremy Kuzmarov, *Modernizing Repression: Police Training and Nation-Building in the American Century* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); and Steven Rabe, *The Killing Zone: The United States Wages Cold War in Latin America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

9. Thomas G. Paterson, “Cold War Revisionism: A Practitioner’s Perspective,” *Diplomatic History* 31, no. 3 (June 2007): 394-395. Other noted “revisionist” historians of U.S. foreign policy include William Appleman Williams, Gabriel Kolko, Gar Alperovitz, Marilyn B. Young, and Lloyd C. Gardner.

10. Thomas Bender, *A Nation among Nations: America’s Place in World History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 7, 10.

11. Alexander Karn, “Toward a Philosophy of Holocaust Education: Teaching Values without Imposing Agendas,” *The History Teacher* 45, no. 2 (February 2012): 224, 236-237.

12. Commissioner’s Task Force on Holocaust Education, “State of Florida Resource Manual On Holocaust Education Grades 4-6: A Study in Character Education,” 2004, <<http://www.teachinflorida.com/Portals/0/Documents/>

Holocaust%20Manuals/HolocaustGrades46.PDF>; and United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Why Teach About the Holocaust?” <<http://www.ushmm.org/education/foreducators/whyteach>>. On the popularity of Holocaust education, see Thomas D. Fallace, *The Emergence of Holocaust Education in American Schools* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

13. Villanova University Peace and Justice Studies, <<http://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/artsci/peaceandjustice/about.html>>.

14. Human Security Report Project, “Human Security Report 2009/2010,” p. 3, <<http://www.hsrgroup.org/docs/Publications/HSR20092010/20092010HumanSecurityReport-Overview.pdf>>.

15. Scott Shane, “U.S. Practices Torture After 9/11, Nonpartisan Review Concludes,” *The New York Times*, April 16, 2013. For the complete list of human rights treaties and ratifications by individual nations, see United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Monitoring the Core International Human Rights Treaties,” <<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/Pages/TreatyBodies.aspx>>.

16. Among the excellent films I have used are *Crucible of Empire: The Spanish-American War* (PBS), which covers war in the Philippines; *The Century: America's Time*, Vols. 1-3 (ABC News & History Channel), which compassionately examines the two world wars; *LBJ*, Vol. 2 (PBS), which deals with the decision for war in Vietnam; *Martin Luther King, Jr., A Historical Perspective* (Xenon Video), which contains King's anti-Vietnam war speech; and *The Panama Deception: Exposing the Cover-up* (Rhino Records).

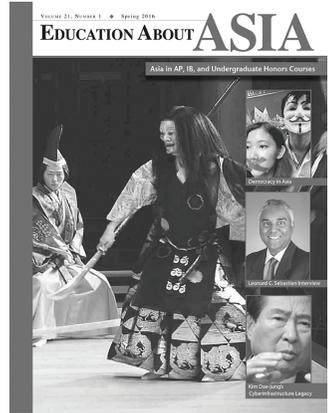
17. Roger Peace, “The War of 1812,” <<http://www.peacehistory-usfp.org/the-war-of-1812/>>. This website is free and without commercial sponsorship. See also, the U.S.-Mexican War, <<http://www.peacehistory-usfp.org/us-mexican-war/>>.



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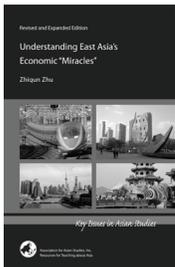
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