

CROSS-CURRENTS



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REVIEW ESSAY

Japan in Maritime Asia: Security, Commerce, and Sovereignty

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Noell Wilson. *Defensive Positions: The Politics of Maritime Security in Tokugawa Japan*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015. 258 pp. \$39.95 (cloth).

Catherine L. Phipps. *Empires on the Waterfront: Japan's Ports and Power, 1858–1899*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2015. 308 pp. \$39.95 (cloth).

Historiography on Japan's place within the world of maritime Asia has undergone dramatic reinterpretation in recent decades. Scholars of the early modern era have thoroughly demolished the shibboleth of *sakoku* ("closed country"), the supposed isolation of Tokugawa Japan before the sudden arrival of Western gunboats in the 1850s. The active pursuit of diplomatic and commercial ties by shogun and daimyo alike embedded Japan firmly within global circuits of exchange (e.g., Hellyer 2010; Toby 1984). Scholars of the modern era, for their part, have been inspired by the "imperial turn" to put overseas empires at the heart of national narratives. Bookending the Tokugawa and Meiji periods, the two studies under review here push the frontiers of this research agenda further. Noell Wilson's political history focuses on the buildup of domainal defense on the coast and the devolution of shogunal monopoly on violence. At the heart of this dialectical relationship was the "Nagasaki system"—the security arrangements that originated in the eponymous port and were eventually implemented throughout Japan. Catherine Phipps's economic history examines the commercial expansion of Meiji Japan by tracing maritime networks of exchange, transportation, and information at multiple spatial scales. Forged in the crucible of Western imperialism, such ties simultaneously compromised the sovereignty of the nation while laying the foundations for empire. Both works offer compelling cases for the centrality of maritime relations in understanding core issues in Japanese history.

The first part of Wilson's *Defensive Positions: The Politics of Maritime Security in Tokugawa Japan* traces the three functions of the Nagasaki system and their consequences for Tokugawa rule over two and a half centuries. The first function was defending Nagasaki against foreign incursions (chapter 1). With the threat of a Portuguese retaliation looming in the aftermath of the failed Shimabara Rebellion (1637–1638), the shogunate opted to entrust the port's security to the Fukuoka and Saga domains. The two local domains established a “composite force” that collectively shouldered security obligations with minimal oversight from Edo. This defensive arrangement proved both militarily effective and fiscally prudent: it warded off major foreign threats for centuries while sparing the shogunate from maintaining a standing force. Yet it did have the unintended consequences of compromising shogunal authority and empowering the two domains over the long run. This shift, Wilson argues, was the first of many small steps that precipitated the eventual collapse of Tokugawa rule.

The Nagasaki system's second function was enforcing shogunal trade restrictions across the Japanese littoral (chapter 2). During the fifty years from 1680 to 1730, two countervailing policies stimulated rampant coastal smuggling by Chinese merchants—Qing China's relaxation of its maritime ban after extinguishing the remnants of Manchu resistance and Tokugawa Japan's restriction of foreign trade to stem specie outflow. As illicit trade grew to alarming levels, the shogun granted local domains broad authority—including the use of lethal force—to combat Chinese smugglers now demonized in official discourse as universally violent marauders. Exasperated by slow progress, the shogunate finally tasked local domains—Fukuoka, Kokura, and Chōshū—to coordinate anti-smuggling work in the Genkai Sea, the hotbed of Chinese trafficking. Violent and unrelenting transdomainal campaigns eventually kept illicit trade at tolerable levels and reconfigured Tokugawa sovereignty to include economic security. Yet this sovereignty, Wilson points out, was exercised through the continued devolution of military authority, which further empowered local domains, since “their inclusion in the highest levels of shogunal decision making further advanced their autonomy by allowing them to promote their own interests under the guise of collaboration” (56). Beyond providing a fascinating picture of interdiction in the premodern world, this chapter should also be of special interest to historians of China in offering a complementary perspective to research on eighteenth-century Sino-Japanese trade (e.g., Zhao 2013).

The final feature of the Nagasaki system was securing the Dutch on Dejima (chapter 3). Centuries-long custodianship of the Dutch by local domains was ritualistic but also substantive, giving daimyos access to foreign knowledge as well as opportunities to assert their military authority over the shogunal magistrate. Wilson identifies two seminal events in this relationship. One was the infamous *Phaeton* incident of 1808, at the height of the Napoleonic Wars, when a British vessel breached poorly defended Dejima and took—but later released—Dutch hostages. This violation of Tokugawa authority embarrassed the shogunate but convinced local domains of the need to shift their defensive strategy from mobilizing troops to maintaining reliable artillery. The other event was the 1844 arrival of the Dutch warship *Palembang* in a bid to expand commercial relations after the First Opium War (1839–1842). Employing his domain’s longtime ties to the Dutch, the Saga lord Nabeshima Naomasa took an unprecedented tour of the warship and obtained valuable knowledge on the latest European firearms. Naomasa’s visit and his subsequent inclusion within the inner circle of the shogunate once again confirmed the shifting balance of power between center and local over military affairs.

The final section of *Defensive Positions* follows the transplantation of the system, first to the Tokugawa heartland (chapter 4), then across the Japanese archipelago (chapter 5). Almost a decade before the arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry’s “black ships” in 1853, the shogunate was already busy fortifying the Kanto region’s maritime defenses. The architect of this project was none other than Naomasa, who applied his knowledge of Dutch technologies to build a new foundry in Saga mass-producing cannons that were eventually deployed across Edo Bay. As Western pressure compelled the shogunate to open more treaty ports, the number of domains assigned to coastal defense duties jumped from a handful in the 1840s to more than fifty by the 1850s (173). To induce compliance, Edo first offered financial subsidies and territorial grants before it finally excused the domains from the alternate attendance system—the ultimate symbol of domainal fealty to shogunal supremacy that defined the Pax Tokugawa. The significance of these defense projects, then, rested as much on their political implications as on their military value. The diffusion of the Nagasaki system empowered daimyos like Naomasa, who formed lateral alliances and marshaled familial ties to enhance their military prowess. As this pan-daimyo coalition seized the national initiative in military affairs, it eroded shogunal authority at the same that it became indispensable to coastal defense. Even Western powers, in their dealings with Edo, implicitly recognized that control of shoreline batteries rested in domainal, rather than

shogunal, hands. Wilson thus offers a new genealogy for the collapse of Tokugawa rule, showing that the devolution of military authority was “not merely a product of the chaotic social environment of the 1860s [but rather] the latest state in the dilution of the shogunate’s control of violence that had begun in the 1640s in newly garrisoned Nagasaki” (218).

Phipps’s study begins where Wilson’s ends by examining Japan’s engagement with maritime Asia during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Its geographical locus is the port of Moji on the northern tip of Kyushu. Yet its scope extends across “transmarine East Asia,” a helpful shorthand term referring to the coastal zones and shared sites of layered sovereignty in colonial northeast and southeast Asia. After acceding to the notorious Ansei Treaties (1858), Japan opened new treaty ports to foreign trade, granted extraterritorial privileges to foreign powers, and surrendered its tariff autonomy by keeping import duties low. These “unequal treaties” thus compromised Japanese sovereignty in the emergent international order by depriving the government of an important fiscal tool to raise critical revenues and protect domestic industries. Meiji Japan’s dogged determination to benefit from maritime commerce under such constraints is the central concern of Phipps’s study.

Divided into three parts with two chapters each, *Empires on the Waterfront: Japan’s Ports and Power, 1858–1899* explores Japan’s maritime connections at different scales. Part One, “Japan in the World,” begins with an overview of the “special trading ports” by tracing their development through different stages of Meiji expansion (chapter 1). Coexisting with treaty ports, these special trading ports in Japan (and later in Korea and Taiwan) operated under full Japanese jurisdiction and were harnessed for full Japanese benefit. They also exported critical commodities such as rice and coal that fed growing overseas markets and commercial networks, particularly those of the British Empire (chapter 2). These strategic outlets were both economically valuable and politically significant. Beyond developing an adequate infrastructure for international trade, they also undergirded Meiji Japan’s grand strategy of taking advantage of the unequal treaties while simultaneously working to abrogate those very treaties.

Part Two, “Ports in the Nation,” focuses on Moji’s spectacular development to explore the interplay between local agency and national politics. An unremarkable fishing village throughout the Tokugawa period, Moji quickly grew into a major shipping hub and coal producer by the Meiji period (chapter 3). Favorable geography and abundant natural resources certainly accounted for this rise to prominence, but Phipps also credits local boosters,

entrepreneurs, and politicians for successfully courting policy makers and investors to develop the port and connect it to global transportation circuits. More significantly, national policy and foreign imperialism converged to create opportunities for locales like Moji to profit from an inherently unequal commercial order (chapter 4). Meiji Japan desperately needed modern steamships, with their size and reliability, for war and commerce. But with such vessels being prohibitively expensive, Japan initially piggybacked on foreign commercial networks until it developed its own fleet. Japan thus voluntarily permitted foreign steamships to ply its waters, call at its ports, and carry its cargo. This “paradox of informal imperialism”—leveraging the positive spillover effects of foreign imperialism—was instrumental to Moji’s development. Throughout the book, Phipps is careful to highlight the lived experiences of ordinary stevedores, merchants, and other Moji residents mobilized to the front lines of Japan’s trade with the rest of transmarine East Asia. Such experiences also included numerous episodes of cross-cultural encounters—quotidian business transactions, minor transgressions like waterfront brawls, and illicit activities like smuggling and prostitution. These seemingly trivial affairs also had implications for important issues of sovereignty, serving as arenas of diplomatic conflict where Japan had to consistently assert and test the limits of its jurisdictional reach within treaty constraints.

The final part of the book, “Moji in the Empire,” examines how Meiji Japan’s painstaking efforts concluded with the revision of the unequal treaties in 1894 and victory over China in 1895. Moji itself played an important supporting role in both enterprises. During the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), its waterfronts hummed with frenetic activity, supplying distant armies and servicing passing vessels (chapter 5). Meanwhile, aggressive and entrepreneurial reportage from the local newspaper *Moji shinpō* gave residents (and the nation) front-row seats to the conflict. On the battlefield, correspondents followed the Japanese army with vivid dispatches. On the home front, they interviewed returning soldiers, passengers, and prisoners before they even disembarked, thereby scooping peers from larger, better-funded organizations. Information, along with commodities, thus coursed along imperial transportation circuits decades in the making. Phipps caps off her study with the local story behind the abolition of extraterritoriality and the restoration of tariff autonomy in 1899 (chapter 6). Ports across Japan—including Moji—jockeyed to obtain permission to freely import and export while securing funds to upgrade their infrastructure for the booming volume of trade that was certain to

follow. Phipps follows the fortunes of this “Open Ports Movement” by tracing legislative maneuvers and public debates. Just as they did years earlier, Moji boosters took an active role, applying strategic pressures in protracted negotiations. Though suffering several setbacks, their campaign finally bore fruit in 1899, when Tokyo conferred upon Moji the coveted status of international trading port. Phipps does not fully delineate the subjectivity of residents undergoing such momentous changes, but she does offer insightful details on local responses and contributions to broader imperial developments. Moreover, it is clear from her narrative that unparalleled intimacy with the war and subsequent political agitation helped the people of Moji better place themselves within the imagined community of the Japanese nation and transmarine East Asia as a whole.

Wilson and Phipps should be commended for their expertly crafted studies, both of which offer important contributions by using the maritime world to address critical questions in Japanese studies. Wilson, in particular, identifies an overlooked driver behind Tokugawa collapse and revises the chronology in the shifting balance of power between center and local. She convincingly demonstrates that the interaction between external security and internal politics was a defining feature of the *entire* Tokugawa period—not just during its final years. Yet her argument might be even more provocative than she lets on. Her contention that the buildup of maritime security decentralized—rather than centralized—political authority adds another wrinkle to existing research on state formation. Scholars have long viewed the security of littoral zones as integral to the development of modern notions of sovereignty and territoriality (e.g., Benton 2010; Tai 2007; Thomson 1996). Others have tied campaigns against coastal threats at the periphery to strengthening authority at the center (e.g., Wang 2014). Viewing these claims in light of Wilson’s findings raises a host of tantalizing questions. Does the centrifugal flow of authority that Wilson traces represent a Tokugawa exception? Or does it highlight the necessity of disaggregating the “state” when looking at the maritime origins of political authority? For Wilson, a comparative perspective might have addressed such questions and thereby placed the Tokugawa experience in broader context. Future studies will need to contend with the findings of this book when exploring the symbiosis between maritime security and political power in the early modern world.

Phipps, for her part, maintains a fine balance in her study: narrating Moji’s experience while showing how that very experience was also the experience of the Meiji Empire writ large.

Besides contributing to burgeoning work on the Japanese Empire, Phipps's research might also complement classic and ongoing work on the Chinese treaty port economy (e.g., Hamashita 1989; So and Meyers 2011). Moreover, Phipps brings much-needed research attention to the loss of tariff autonomy, a feature of the "unequal treaties" that had profound consequences for sovereignty, industrialization, and fiscal policy. Her focus offers a timely counterpart to recent interest in extraterritoriality—the other, more notorious feature of Western imperialism in East Asia (e.g., Cassel 2012; Kayaoğlu 2010). Sino-Japanese comparisons largely lost favor among historians years ago. Yet new research suggests that parallels and differences in late nineteenth-century, semi-colonial East Asia are worth revisiting. Given its methodological innovation and explicit engagement with issues inside and outside of Japanese studies, Phipps's book should appeal to a wide audience.

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