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Reseña de "Japan and the Pacific, 1540-1920. Threat and Opportunity" de Mark Caprio y Koichiro Matsuda (eds.)
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Lisboa, Portugal

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=36101404
BOOK REVIEW

Mark Caprio and Koichiro Matsuda (ed.)


The Pacific World series, published by Ashgate, has drawn the attention of the academic community to the importance, impact and History of the Pacific Ocean, as well as to those nations directly or closely connected with this natural feature, which were either forgotten or neglected for a long time. It is of the utmost importance that this kind of History should have the opportunity to be spread through the academic community, and Ashgate, along with several researchers, has provided a much-welcomed series about the subject.

The lands christened Cipango by Marco Polo, which are better known as Japan, contribute with their History to Volume 10 of the Pacific World series. A collection of eighteen articles, selected by Mark Caprio and Matsuda Koichiro, constitute the volume, which is divided into three parts: “The Japanese views of the Pacific”, “Diplomatic and Economic Relations” and “Expansion and Diaspora”.

The first article reveals the Japanese perspective of the seas that surrounded their home islands. Since Japan comprises a large number of islands, one would expect that, throughout History, the Japanese people would have sought to expand beyond the territorial borders imposed by Nature. However, many reasons, including Japan’s seclusion during the Tokugawa period, have given a false impression, leading people to think that the Japanese had lost interest or feared exploring the waters around their own islands. In this article Marcia Yonemoto depicts this period of the Japanese History from a different angle, enabling us to appreciate how closely related to the sea the Japanese were back then. Notwithstanding the notorious reluctance of the Japanese to go abroad, especially due to their dread of confronting different cultures and peoples, fears and potential enemies, it did not prevent them from pursuing their curiosity to fill in the gaps in their knowledge of the oceans. Japanese sailors, writers, artists and cartographers of this period left a significant knowledge and a legacy of skills on how to handle the waters around Japan. This article, therefore, reveals and analyses
how the Japanese faced the Pacific seas, how they interpreted the fears and fantasies arising from the “dangerous” waters and finally how they gradually dealt with this situation throughout their History.

In the following article, which in a certain way complements the previous one, Henry Frei looks at the emergence of Australia, from the Japanese perspective of the world, from 1540 to 1900. It is well known that the Australian continent was discovered and explored by European countries, but very little is known about how its discovery influenced the overall points of view of Asians, more specifically the Japanese, in this case. The author reveals how part of the South Pacific was unknown to the Japanese until the arrival and influence of Europeans in Japan during the 16th century. With the help of foreign information, the Japanese intellectuals and cartographers were gradually able to draw maps which included Australia, New Zealand and the archipelagos surrounding New Guinea and modern-day Indonesia. From that moment on, provided with appropriate maps, the Japanese were able to find easier sea routes, to contact with other countries from the Pacific Rim and to establish diverse cultural and trading links with their inhabitants. One such country was Australia, which at the end of the 19th century became an important player in the region and whose relations with Japan were boosted at different levels. Frei presents an easy to understand but comprehensive text about the Japanese-Australian relations that have developed since Australia was introduced to Japan at the beginning of the Meiji period.

The third article, by Tsunoyama Sakae, is from the diplomatic and economic part of the book and sheds some light on the importance of the first Japanese cities where Europeans first came into contact with Japan. Sakai is one such city and is the object of Sakae’s study in this text. During the 15th and 16th centuries, European merchants and explorers were a common sight in the Far East and in the Western Pacific. Well accustomed to finding less developed civilizations, Europeans now confronted this “new” region explored with strong, powerful nations that could offer both commerce and knowledge on a significant scale and ways to expand their influence, depending on their goals. At the time Sakai was Japan’s largest city for international trade, with a high commercial status in terms of foreign commerce, which experienced a period of great prosperity between 1469 and 1615. From Ming China to Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands and Great Britain, all made their way to Sakai in search of greater profit, as well as gold and silver. The prosperity and the results obtained in Sakai produced some relevant effects in raising the standard of living in Japan. However, this well-being would soon disappear for several reasons: internal conflicts, funds transferred to other cities to build religious facilities and the simple lack of management of this prosperity by the city’s businessmen. A legacy was nonetheless left, part
of which is the tea ceremony. Born in Sakai in the 16th century, it would permanently mould the Japanese culture.

Speaking of trade with foreign powers and of the presence of European powers in Japan, the following article, written by W. Michael Mathes, surveys the brief commercial relations between Spain and Japan from 1592 to 1617. Spain, aware of the Japanese context through the Portuguese, attempted to gain a more significant influence in the lands of Cipango. The Philippines played an important role in this process, since it was there that the Spanish concentrated their efforts to start commercial and other relations with Japan. However, those efforts were constantly sabotaged both by the countermovements of Spain’s enemies, namely the Dutch, which also had a strong presence in Japan and in the Pacific, and by the exaggerated demands made by the Spanish, who sought exclusive commercial and presence rights from Japan. The prolonged efforts made by the Spanish embassies in Japan to attain those objectives are related in detail in Mathes’s text, including the treaties signed in the Philippines, where the Japanese also had a strong presence. The Spanish desire to establish a “bridge” between the Philippines and Japan was short lived and had few consequences at the time. With Japan’s isolation from the West for two centuries, Spain witnessed the end of most of its small ventures to obtain dividend, virtually without bringing anything of use for the Spanish Empire yet the Japanese presence in the Philippines would bring about a stable relationship between the two cultures, with positive results in the future.

Arano Yasunori, in the following article, writes about how the idea of “national seclusion” in early modern Japan is misunderstood. People tend to presume that Japan was closed to the outside world during the Tokugawa period; however, this interpretation is not completely accurate. As Yasunori explains in this article, by this time, Japan exercised tighter control over foreign relations, but it should be emphasized that this procedure was by no means applicable to all the other Asian powers. Given the context and the events of the time, the author suggests that the terms “maritime prohibition” and “civilized/barbarian order” would be more appropriate than “national seclusion” to describe the foreign relations of early Modern Japan. Throughout the article, Yasunori explains how “national seclusion”, or Sakoku, gradually took shape in the Japanese society, the term itself having more impact than expected after it appeared in an English translation of a book on the History of Japan. From the moment the word was published and spread around, it was widely used until Commodore Perry arrived in Japan. How the term was created and how it was accepted in Japan in the early 20th century are the key topics of this article.
Despite Japan’s relative closure to foreigners or to non-Asians, this stance did not prevent the country from trading with other Asian nations, namely Korea and China, which would eventually transform the Japanese economy. The silver trade was one of the most important Japanese exports to the rest of Asia. Initially controlled by the Portuguese and, for some time, by the Japanese and the Dutch, the Japanese State ultimately gained full control of it from 1668 onwards. Trading with China, through Korean routes, brought unexpected results for both countries, since the tighter control over silver exports protected the Japanese currency and economy and subsequently limited the Korean-Chinese trade of the same products (silver and silk). Kazui Tashiro researches this subject and explains it in another article about the Japanese economy.

In the beginning of the 18th century Russia was regarded as a Western power but at the same time as an active participant in Asian affairs. The geographical proximity naturally led the Russians to find a way to approach Japan. George Lensen, a World War 2 veteran, dedicates a very accessible article to the first Japanese-Russian relations from 1700 to 1850 and from 1850 until the present. The author analyses how the Russians, under Peter the Great, gradually moved towards the northern periphery of Japan’s native islands from the beginning of the 18th century, and how both peoples learned to live with each other due to their proximity, both at cultural and commercial levels. Both their spirit of adventure and territorial aggression led the Russians to find their way to northern Japan. This attitude would undermine the relations between both countries and bring long-term consequences which, to a certain degree, still persist today. The evolution and the decadence of Sino-Russian relations and the rivalry between the two are well explained in Lensen’s text.

With the opening up of Japan, which began when Perry’s ships arrived in Tokyo Bay, the Japanese themselves gained a new world vision, and efforts were made to place Japan on the same level as the other powers of the Pacific Rim. The article by Eugene Soviak reveals the importance of the diary of the Iwakura diplomatic mission to the United States and Europe in search of more Western knowledge and development strategies for Japan. This mission was the first of its kind after the Meiji Restoration and would make an important contribution to the organization of the future Taisho and Showa periods. Soviak analyses the importance of the report, how it was devised and the context, including the emotional context, in which it was interpreted.

On its path to modernization after the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan’s conservatism still made it difficult to change some elements inside its society, namely the role of women within the new Japanese order. The improvement of their education was a matter of concern for the Japanese Government,
which chose to expose young children to external influences so that they could serve as role models for the rest of society. Christine Chapman talks about one of these children, a girl called Tsuda Ume, who was send to America at the age of 6, in 1871, to learn about the American lifestyle, so upon her return she could teach other Japanese women about the most sought-after educational model in those times of change. Her life, from the time she started her journey to the United States until the awakening of feminist activism and women’s independence, is explained through letters she wrote during her busy life.

Finally, in the last article from the diplomatic and economic section of the book, Wayne McWilliams looks at the Soejima Mission to China, which was the first Japanese mission to that country after the Meiji Restoration. Not only was it a historic mission filled with major objectives, but it was also a sign to China that Japan was no longer a small participant in the region and was there to make its presence felt. The clock had been set for the beginning of Japanese expansion and China had to learn how to deal with this new reborn nation. The Soejima Mission was the first means to achieve this end, and its methods and objectives are discussed in this part of the book.

To open the final section of the book dedicated to Expansion and Diaspora, an article written by Nagazumi Yoko examines the Japan-Thailand relations during the 17th century. Japan’s sporadic or short period of openness to external relations during this century gave the opportunity to both of these kingdoms to trade formally and to establish diplomatic relations. Nonetheless, a decision by the Japanese Government of the time to close Japan to most foreigners was extended to include the Thai Kingdom, which from that moment on saw its presence in Japan interrupted for some decades. Nagazumi Yoko’s article surveys the commerce between the two nations when restrictions were imposed on Thailand, and how it was resumed later in the 17th century under new circumstances that would last until the opening of Japan to the World in the second half of the 19th century.

With Japan’s seclusion to the exterior during the 17th century, many Japanese who had been influenced by the Portuguese, namely those converted to Christianity, were forced to leave Japan for various places in the Far East. Madalena Ribeiro brings into focus the history and destination of these groups of thousands of Japanese who, despised in their homeland, had no other choice than to try their luck in the rest of the region, some with more success than others. Macau, Siam, Tonkin, Cochinchina, Cambodia and Batavia were some of the places where these Japanese established communities in order to start a new life.

The arrival of Commodore Matthew Perry’s ships in Japan, in 1853, is a well known milestone for the beginning of Japan’s opening to the world.
Less well known is the story of how Japanese interpreters learned the English language before Perry’s visit. The saga goes back as far as 1830, when three Japanese castaways found terra firma on the American coast and for some time had contact with that unfamiliar culture. Stephen Kohl chooses to present an article about the impact on Japan of this “new” education of the castaways, before and after the arrival of Perry’s ships.

As stated in previous articles in this book, after the Meiji Restoration, Japan sought to expand its influence and presence throughout Asia, especially in the near-by territories, which included the Korean Peninsula. In 1876, after a period that was short if compared with the efforts of Western powers, Japan signed the Kanghwa Treaty with Korea, an agreement that actually reserved to the latter a minor role in Japan’s sphere of influence. In his article, Brahm Agrawal aims to reveal how Japanese-Korean relations were established for this purpose, how they led to the signing of the treaty and which methods Japan used to attain its goals that would ultimately change forever the political context of the whole area.

Between 1942 and 1945, the Japanese Empire would eventually spread to the Philippines, one of the world’s largest groups of islands and one of the closest to Japan. But the idea of the Japanese people expanding and claiming the Philippines for their own society dates back to the 1886-1891 period, when four Japanese nationalist activists drew up their plans to expand to the Philippines. The idea that Japan needed more territory to relocate its excessive population created the basic context for the need to expand towards the South Sea archipelagos. By the time of the Meiji Restoration, Japan was facing a new World that implied having more raw materials, food, space, armed forces and a strong position over its neighbours to prevent any hostilities against the country. In this article Josefa Daniel examines how the ideas, conceived by these four Japanese people, found their way to become part of the new Japanese imperial order.

In late 19th century and early 20th century, the excessive population and other factors led to a wave of emigration from Japan to other countries. Russia was one such country and a significant number of Japanese emigrants entered the Far Eastern regions of Russia between 1875 and 1916. Igor Saveliev presents an article about Japanese emigration movements to the inhospitable lands of the Russian Far East. Complemented with very useful demographic graphs and charts, he shows how the flow of Japanese emigration was stable during the periods studied, how the Japanese citizens adapted to a virtually unknown culture, and how they learned to preserve their own national traditions during their short seasonal work period as foreigners in Russia.
Also regarding emigration, the following article looks at the history behind the Japanese prostitutes in 19th century America. Written by Ichioka Yuji, this text relates how these women integrated American society, compared with Japanese women in other lands, such as China and Southeast Asia, during the same period. The conditions they endured to get to the United States and their lives, when they arrived at their destination, define the objectives of this article on Japanese emigration.

The final article, by Iwamoto Hiromitsu, which deals with a similar topic to the Philippines and Korea, describes how far Japan went after the Meiji Restoration, by setting up a colony in Papua and New Guinea between 1890 and 1914. It was either a sign that “territorial expansion” was working for the Japanese, or a sign of unrest for westerners who had already settled in those islands far from Japan. Nonetheless, the Papua and New Guinea communities were not formed by regular Japanese people going abroad and working for westerners, but rather were a small colony inside the Western structure. This article reveals how this endeavour started, developed, prospered and declined, comparing it with other Japanese colonies in the Pacific, as well as with the other colonial powers in the area.

To sum up, this book analyses various interesting topics regarding lesser-known subjects of the History of Japan and of its role in the Pacific Rim, from the Tokugawa period to the beginning of the 20th century. An acceptable reading pattern is provided by dividing the articles into three sections and, at the same time, creating a link between the articles in each section. In other words, the topics neither disperse in different directions nor cause the reader to lose the thread. The result is a very disciplined work of great academic value.

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