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Research Article

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Luoyang, the Salad Bowl of Multicultural Coexistence and An International Trading City in the Late Period of the Northern Wei Dynasty

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Abstract

This paper examines the formation of Luoyang, the capital city of the Northern Wei Dynasty, from a multicultural perspective. For this purpose, I use Chinese historical records, such as *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*, which contains demographic information about this ancient Chinese city, as well as physical evidence, such as epitaphs and relics. The main findings of this research indicate that Luoyang was a cosmopolitan city where Xianbei rulers, Chinese officials, Central Asians, Goguryeo people, Turkic nomads, Arabs, and Africans known as Kunlunnu all coexisted. Also, thanks to its inclusiveness Luoyang could accommodate cosmopolitan venues, such as the Sitong Market, the international market located in southern Luoyang, where Confucian traditions, Buddhist architecture, and cultural forms of nomadic and Central Asian origins were integrated. With these findings, this paper is among the first studies of Luoyang's multiculturalism and provides a basis for critical investigation into the origins of cosmopolitanism in East Asian history.

Keywords

Luoyang, multiculturalism, the Central Asian traditions, *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang*, the trade policy of Emperor Xuanwu

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Introduction

Chang'an, the capital of the Tang dynasty, is widely recognized as an international metropolis. It was home not only to temples of Zoroastrianism, Nestorian Christianity, Manichaeism, and Islam, but also to foreign monks and scholars from Silla, Balhae, and Japan. However, fewer foreigners resided in Chang'an than in Luoyang. According to records in *A Record of Buddhist Monasteries in Luoyang (Luoyang qielan ji,* LQJ*)*, Luoyang, the second capital of the Northern Wei dynasty, was home to diverse ethnic groups, with at least 9.1% of its population being from the Western Regions. In fact, more than 10% of the capital city's population were foreigners, an anomaly in premodern China when global exchange was significantly more constrained. Taking this into account, several scholars have analyzed Luoyang's characteristics as an 'international city,'[1] highlighting the multi-ethnic presence, the linguistic diversity, and the vibrant coexistence of Xianbei nomadic, Han Chinese, and Central Asian cultures (Choi 2015, 135–78; Choi 2017, 1–18). While previous studies have established Luoyang as an international city defined by multi-ethnic and multicultural coexistence, they have largely overlooked a specific analysis of the underlying factors that led to its emergence as a global metropolis. The central premise of this paper is that by investigating the underlying factors behind Luoyang's rise, we can effectively highlight its status as a cosmopolitan metropolis comparable to the Tang Dynasty's Chang'an.

Driven by this inquiry, this study explores the historical background that facilitated Luoyang's transformation into a thriving cosmopolitan hub. First, I examine the characteristics of Luoyang, the 'international

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1 Many scholars referred to Chang'an, the capital of the Tang dynasty, as an international city, but this differs from the concept of an international city used today. In this paper as well, Luoyang is designated as an international city due to its characteristics of diverse settlements, the coexistence of various cultures, and its role as a space for international trade; however, since this term has not yet been established academically, it is used as a provisional concept. Therefore, it may differ from the concept currently in use.

city,' by analyzing the coexistence of multiple ethnicities, languages, and cultures, as well as the presence of an international market. Next, I investigate the background behind Luoyang's becoming a multi-ethnic residential area during the Luoyang period of the Northern Wei from the perspective of its inclusive policy toward conquered peoples. Finally, I evaluate the impact of Emperor Xuanwu's open trade policy on the influx of Western merchants and the exchange of Western goods and culture in Luoyang.

This paper holds significant historical value as it reaffirms the multi-ethnic distribution and multicultural coexistence of the Northern Wei's capital, Luoyang. Furthermore, it demonstrates that Luoyang functioned as a cosmopolitan precursor to Tang-era Chang'an.

Cosmopolitan City Luoyang: Coexistence Of Multiple Ethnic Groups, Languages, And Cultures

A large number of foreigners, including non-Xianbei ethnic groups, resided in Luoyang, contributing to its diverse population. The demographic distribution of Luoyang during the latter half of the Northern Wei dynasty testifies this residential diversity. The Xianbei ruling class resided in between thirty and forty residential wards known as *li* (里), including Wangzifang (王子坊), the ward for royal princes, and Yongkangli (永康里). Similarly, high-ranking ethnic Chinese officials maintained their own grand mansions throughout Luoyang (Chang 2002, 330–41; Choi 2015, 144–47). Beyond the Xianbei ruling class and the Han Chinese population, Luoyang's demographic landscape was further enriched by diverse ethnic groups from across Eurasia. Foreigners who surrendered or immigrated to the Northern Wei were assigned to specific residential wards: those from the southern regions were settled in Guizhengli, while northern nomadic peoples were settled in Guideli. Similarly, those from the eastern regions were arranged to move to Muhuali, and those from the Western Regions, referred to as Xiyi (西夷), were to be reside in Muyili (慕義里) (*LQJ*, 3/160-1). Furthermore, both archaeological excavations and historical records confirm the presence of a diverse international population in Luoyang, including Arabs, Turkic nomads, and people from Goguryeo. Particularly noteworthy are the terracotta figurines known as Kunlun-yong (昆侖俑), which scholars identify as representing individuals of African or South Asian descent (Choi 2014a, 263–69; Choi 2015, 143).

According to the LQJ, the total population of the capital during the late Northern Wei dynasty was approximately 109,000 households (hu) (LQJ, 5/349). Within this demographic, 10,000 households resided in Muyili, a district specifically designated for merchants, singers, and dancers from the Western Regions (LQJ, 3/160–61). Furthermore, over 3,000 households (jia) of defectors from the Southern Dynasties were settled in Guizhengli (歸正里) (LQJ, 2/117). Given that *jia* (家) and *hu* (戶) were equivalent household units in the historical records, it can be inferred that the 10,000 households in Muyili-primarily composed of residents from the Western Regions—accounted for approximately 9.1% of Luoyang's total registered households. This significant percentage clearly underscores the city's prominence as a major international hub and a center of cross-cultural exchange. If we incorporate defectors from the Southern Dynasties—the Chinese regimes founded in the Yangtze River Valley—the proportion of foreign and non-local residents rises to at least 11.9% of all registered households. This conservative estimate further solidifies Luoyang's standing as a diverse global metropolis (Choi 2014a, 265–66, and footnote 100; Choi 2015, 142–43). This figure significantly exceeds the modern demographics of major East Asian capitals, such as Seoul, the capital of South Korea, where foreign residents account for 1.39%, and Beijing, the capital of China, where the foreign population remains around 1% in the 2010s. In this sense, Luoyang functioned as an unprecedented international hub, characterized by a foreign residency rate significantly higher than that observed in major contemporary East Asian capitals (Choi 2017, 2–3).

A multitude of ethnic groups brought their native tongues to the capital, creating a vibrant linguistic tapestry of Xianbei and Chinese dialects. Consequently, Luoyang became a cultural salad bowl where nomadic traditions, Chinese customs, and Western influences intertwined and flourished side by side. The historical materials that show Emperor Xiaowen's language policy are the imperial edict issued in 495 (the nineteenth year of the Taihe era) and the conversations between Emperor Xiaowen and his officials in the Biography of Yuan Hui, Prince of Xianyang (咸陽王), in the *History of Northern Wei* (魏書, WS) (WS, 7xia/177 and 21shang/536). An analysis of these two records reveals certain pragmatic exemptions in the regulations: First, the prohibition was applied only within the *zhaoting* (朝廷), that is, the court; while the policy was strict for the elite, non-officials of non-Han population and Xianbei officials over the age of thirty were permitted to continue using the Xianbei language. This can be reversely interpreted as a ban on the Xianbei language and the forced use of Chinese. While regulations theoretically banned non-Han languages in private, historical accounts of individuals like Yu Jin (于謹), Yuan Wenyao (元文遙), Changsun Jian (長孫儉), and Daxi Shi (達奚寔) provide evidence that the Xianbei tongue remained in active use. Their linguistic habits suggest that the transition to the Han language was far from complete in the private lives of the Xianbei aristocracy. This implies that the ban on Xianbei speech remained largely nominal. Despite the imperial mandate, many Xianbei elites—even those at the heart of political power—still spoke non-Han nomadic languages, illustrating a persistent attachment to their linguistic heritage. Evidence of Luoyang's linguistic diversity is further bolstered by scholars and monks like Bodhiruci (菩提流支) and Miduodaoren (蜜多道人). The latter, a confidant of Emperor Xiaoming, utilized his command of Xianbei, Chinese, and languages of the Western Regions to bridge cultural gaps at the highest levels of government. Such cases suggest that multilingualism was common among the foreign residents of Luoyang, with many speaking a hybrid of Indic, Iranian, and Sinitic languages (Tang 1959, 145; Zhu 2005, 510; Choi 2014b, 204–208; Choi 2010b, 199, 203–25; Choi 2014c, 148–52; Choi 2024, 119–45).

Next, let's look at the coexistence of Xianbei, Chinese, and Western Regions' cultures. The people of various ethnicities in Luoyang ate their own food, and the foods of the grassland nomads, such as meat (mutton), milk tea, and milk porridge (Zhang and Wei 1999, 345–46; Lu 2006, 121–22; Zhai 2009, 34; Choi 2010c, 404–05) coexisted with the foods of South China, known as the Jiangnan region, from which many Chinese refugees migrated during the Northern Wei dynasty, such as tea, slices of raw fish called *Kuai* (膾), and seafood (Zhang and Wei 1999, 325, 329–31), as well as the foods of other ethnic groups, such as grilled nomadic or Western Regions' meat and soup, boiled *qiang, mozhi* (貊炙), a Goguryeo meat dish comparable to modern Korean bulgogi,[2] lamb soup, and 'Hu' soup (Lu 2006, 97–126). The musical traditions of the grassland nomads, the Han Chinese, and the Western Regions did not merely coexist; they actively influenced one another and were ultimately integrated into the official court music. This synthesis reflects the Northern Wei's institutional embrace of its diverse cultural heritage (*Sui Shu* (hereafter SS), 14/313–14; SS, 15/378). A wide array of foreign performance arts flourished in Luoyang: Buddhist liturgical music and instruments were introduced alongside nomadic traditions such as the Huibo-le (廻波樂) and the vibrant Chile dance (敕勒舞) (Choi 2010c, 413–15). Furthermore, diverse musical instruments from the Western Regions, including the *huxiao* (胡簫), the Qiang flute (羌笛), and various other Central Asian flutes, became immensely popular among the city's residents, deeply influencing the local cultural fabric (Zhou 1991, 9; Luoyangshi wenwugongzuodui 1991; Ye 2000, 988; Li 2007, 114b–15a; Yan 2007, 32–3; Liu 2011, 4a–5b). Confucian ceremonial buildings, such as the Mingtang and Biyong, coexisted with Buddhist temples in Luoyang. Many Buddhist temples were built in the architectural style of the Western Regions. The cultural landscape of Luoyang was further enriched by the arrival of acrobatics and magic from the Western Regions. These spectacular performances captivated the public, reflecting a society that was highly receptive to and fascinated by foreign marvels and exotic traditions (Kakeda 2006, 24–5; Choi 2016, 355–56).

In addition, the Sitong Market (四通市) (LQJ, 3/161) meaning open

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[2] For *Qiminyaoshu* meat processing method, see Wang (2005, 13-19).

to all directions, and located to the south of the city, was a vital nexus for communal meetings and economic exchange among the many ethnic groups residing in Luoyang. The jade and jeweled bowls owned by the royalty of Northern Wei, as well as the gold and silver vessels, silver-enamel wares, jade urns, and crystal bowls favored by Yuan Chen (元琛), Prince of Hejian (河間王) and grandson of Emperor Wencheng, were presumably acquired through trade with the Western Regions or purchased at the Sitong Market. The Sitong Market stood as a vibrant symbol of Luoyang's international stature. Here, the Xianbei aristocracy was deeply fascinated by the craftsmanship and luxury of goods traded from the Western Regions, making the market a crucial site where foreign prestige and imperial power converged (Jia 2013, 29a–9b).

Northern Wei Dynasty's Recruitment of The Conquered Non-Tuoba Ethnic Peoples and the Relative Openness to Multiple Cultures

After occupying Zhongshan, the capital of Later Yan, in 398, Emperor Daowu (道武帝), the founding emperor of Northern Wei, compelled 360,000 people, including the ruling class and subjects from the six eastern provinces (州), to Pingcheng and its vicinity. According to the *Wei shu* (WS), this group consisted of Han Chinese nomadic groups under the Murong clan (慕容氏), Goguryeo people (高句麗), and other ethnic tribes (WS, 2/31–2). After emerging victorious in their campaigns of expansion, the Northern Wei dynasty's rulers displaced a large number of conquered peoples and settled them in Pingcheng and the National Capital Region (京畿).[3] In particular, Emperor Taiwu, the third emperor of Northern Wei and a formidable warrior-ruler who unified northern China, relocated fifty thousand households from Tongwan (統萬), Longcheng (龍城)

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[3] For research on Northern Wei's immigration policy, see Ichisada (1953, 394-422), Koga (1973), Maeda (1973, 19-48), Li (1999), and Li (2000).

and Guzang (姑臧), the capitals of Xia, Northern Yan, and Northern Liang, respectively, and captive Chinese people of the Liu Song dynasty, the first of the Southern Dynasties founded by Liu Yu, to the surrounding areas of the capital (Maeda 1979). The people of the fallen nations did not merely become subjects of oppressive rule; rather, their former ruling class was integrated into the Northern Wei's ruling structure, allowing the coexistence of old and new elites within the imperial government.

Zhou Yiliang, a scholar of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, observed that the Northern Wei emperors actively recruited talent from a diverse array of sources. By absorbing intellectuals and administrators from conquered states, various nomadic tribes, and the Han Chinese elite of North China, the dynasty successfully bolstered its administrative capacity and political legitimacy. Zhou noted that the emperors of Northern Wei appointed officials from the former Han Chinese elites of the Eastern Jin and Liu Song, as well as non-Chinese nomadic and pastoral peoples from the Later Zhao, Former Qin, Later Qin, Later Yan, Xia, and Northern Liang. This differed from the rulers of the Eastern Jin and the Southern Dynasties, who favored the early northern émigré ruling class while rejecting the powerful local families of the Jiangnan region. They marginalized those who immigrated later from the North, denouncing them with the derogatory term *huangcang* (荒傖) to question their status and lineage. In contrast, the Northern Dynasties' eventual unification of the Southern Dynasties was a feat made possible by their inclusive policies of integrating conquered peoples and diverse ethnic groups into the ruling class (Zhou 1988, 555–58).

A Chinese scholar also revealed that the Tuoba rulers of Northern Wei recognized the monarchic clans and ruling classes of conquered or surrendered states as part of their dynasty's hierarchy. They were treated with high regard in multiple aspects, including government positions, intermarriage, economic status, law, and funeral rites (Ding 2015). The veteran officials of Later Yan for instance, made significant contributions to the establishment of the Northern Wei's foundational systems. Likewise, ethnic elites provided the blueprint for the dynasty's civil service, ritual music, legal frameworks, entertainment protocols, and calendrical systems, ensuring the continuity of governance in North China (Choi 2013, 160; Tao 2016). Among them were: An Qu (安屈) and his son An Tong (安同), alongside Shan Shi (鄯視) and his son Shan Gan (鄯乾), both from Kroraina (鄯善 in WS), the successor state to Loulan (樓蘭); Che Yiluo (車伊洛), Che Xie (車歇), Che Bozhu (車伯主), Che Boli (車波利), Che Luodu (車洛都), and their descendants, from Karashahr (焉耆胡 in WS) (Choi 2016, 338–40).

Moreover, previous research in Korea has analyzed the Monument of Emperor Wencheng's Southern Tour (文成帝南巡碑) and pointed out that the *jinshiguan* (近侍官)—attendants and guards close to the emperor, similar to the Mongol Empire's *keshig*—were drawn from various ethnic groups. Analyses of the lineages appointed to these positions show that the emperors of Northern Wei integrated people from the Xianbei, Gaoche (高車), Xiongnu (匈奴), Xiehu (契胡), Tuyuhun (吐谷渾), Rouran (柔然), Di (氐), Qiang (羌), and the Han Chinese into the ruling class (Choi 2007, 53–8; Choi 2016, 263–69). As the capital of early Northern Wei, Pingcheng was a cosmopolitan center where numerous tribes lived together, and diverse cultures coexisted.[4]

The cosmopolitan spirit of the early Northern Wei dynasty continued with the strategic move to Luoyang. Although Luoyang was viewed through a Sinitic lens as the sacred center of the world, it did not become a closed enclave. Instead, the inclusive hiring practices of the Pingcheng era continued, allowing Luoyang to function as a unique space where nomadic energy and traditional Chinese centralism merged, fostering a diverse ruling class that transcended ethnic boundaries. Wang Su (王肅) (WS, 63/1407), Xiao Baoyin (蕭寶夤) (WS, 59/1313–14), Xiao Zan (蕭贊), also written as Xiao Zong (蕭綜) (WS, 59/1325), Pei Shuye (裴叔業) (WS, 71/1567), Xiahou Daoqian (夏侯道遷) (WS, 71/1583), Xi Fayou (席法友) (WS, 71/1587), Wang Shibi (王世弼) (WS, 71/1588), Jiang Yuezhi (江悅之) (WS, 71/1589), Chun Yudan (淳于誕) (WS, 71/1592), Li Miao

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4 The coexistence of multiple cultures and the maintenance of Xianbei culture in Pingcheng in the first period of Northern Wei can be seen in Choi (2010a, 283–326).

(李苗) (WS, 71/1594), and others, defected to Northern Wei and were appointed to important official positions. In particular, Wang Su, a member of the Langya clan—a prestigious family of the Southern Dynasties—contributed significantly to the reform of the Northern Wei government system (*Nan Qi shu*, 57/998). Together with Liu Fang, he introduced the Southern ritual systems and drafted the master plan for the construction of Luoyang, the new capital established after Emperor Xiaowen's transfer in 493 (LQJ, 3/146).

The emperors of Northern Wei not only accepted the ruling classes of conquered nations but also took women from those states' royal families as empresses and concubines, integrating former enemies into the very heart of the imperial family. For example, Emperor Daowu's Qatun Murong (慕容氏) was a woman from Later Yan, Emperor Taiwu's Qatun Helian (赫連氏) was from Xia (夏), and Emperor Wencheng's Empress Feng (馮氏) from Northern Yan. All of them came from royal clans of states associated with the Sixteen Kingdoms. Emperor Mingyuan (明元帝) did not have an empress, but he made the daughter of Yao Xing (姚興) his concubine. Yao Xing was the king of the Later Qin, one of the Sixteen Kingdoms that dominated the Guanzhong region (關中). Founded by the Qiang people, this state was a key regional power before its elites were incorporated into Northern Wei's ruling class. Jennifer Holmgren noted this trend, arguing that the appointment of empresses from conquered states was frequent in the Northern Wei's initial phase. She pointed out that this practice carried a clear political motive: to gain the loyalty and support of the subjugated peoples (Holmgren, 1995, 76–80). Significantly, the Gao Zhao (高肇) family of Goguryeo origin played a central role in the imperial succession of Northern Wei. Gao Zhaorong (高照容), an ethnic Goguryeo woman, was the birth mother of Emperor Xuanwu and was later accorded the title of empress after her murder and her son's enthronement. Her niece, Gao Ying (高英), also became empress of Emperor Xuanwu. This recurring elevation of Goguryeo descendants to the highest female positions in the empire reflects the Northern Wei's strategic inclusion of Northeast Asian elites within its inner circle. The presence of Goguryeo women was not limited to the empress's quarters but was also prevalent among the imperial kin. A notable example is the wife of Yuan Xiang (元詳), Prince of Beihai (北海王), who was herself of Goguryeo origin. Her involvement in a scandal with the wife of the Prince of Anding (安定王), Yuan Xiang's own brother, highlights how individuals from Goguryeo were embedded in the private lives and complex social intrigues of the Tuoba-Yuan imperial clan (Choi 2014a, 268–69). Yu Xianji (于仙姬), Emperor Wencheng's concubine, was a princess of the Khotan kingdom (Zhao 1992, 180).[5]

Because the emperors appointed officials from various ethnic groups, conquered peoples, and defectors from the Southern Dynasties, Luoyang became a place where people of diverse origins lived together. Following the capital's transfer from Pingcheng, the city was inhabited by the Tuoba royal family, nomadic groups such as the Xianbei, Xiongnu, Jie, Di, Qiang, and Gaoche, and the Han Chinese, creating a unique multicultural environment (Choi 2014a, 263–69; Choi 2015, 143). Not only the ruling class but also commoners who worked for it lived in Luoyang. According to the LQJ, Luoyang was inhabited by people of various professions and origins. Liu Hu (劉胡) and his four brothers, who were butchers, lived in Zhihuoli (殖貨里); coffin dealers and funeral workers resided in Cixiaoli (慈孝里) and Fengzhongli (奉終里). In Zuncaili, Wei Ying (韋英) from Jingzhao lived alongside Xiang Ziji (向子集) from Henei Commandery (河內郡), while Hou Qing (侯慶) and Liu Bao (劉寶) from Nanyang Commandery (南陽郡) lived in areas dedicated to handicrafts and burials. Other notable residents included the musician Tian Sengchao (田僧超) in Diaoyinli (調音里), winemakers like Liu Baituo from Hedong in Tuiguli (退酤里), and the family of Cui Han (崔涵) from Anping Prefecture (安平縣), Boling Commandery (博陵郡) in Fucaili (阜財里). Finally, the area surrounding the Sitong Market, also called Yongqiaoshi (永橋市), was a bustling hub for fishmongers and other merchants (Choi 2015, 146–47).

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5 The corresponding reference is "Weidi Xianchao gu Yu (Xianji) furen muzhi" [Epitaph of the late Lady Yu (Xianji) of the previous reign of the Wei Emperor].

In summary, even after Emperor Xiaowen's radical implementation of so-called Sinicization policies, Luoyang remained a profoundly cosmopolitan city characterized by ethnic and cultural plurality. The Xianbei people did not simply dissolve into Han Chinese culture; instead, they tenaciously preserved their own Xianbei customs and identity. Furthermore, the vibrant presence of cultures from the Western Regions ensured that Luoyang functioned as a site of multicultural coexistence rather than one of unilateral assimilation (Choi 2014a, 241–78). Thus, the diverse inhabitants of Luoyang, representing a vast array of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, developed a profound mutual understanding and tolerance for one another. This fostered an environment where cultural diversity was not merely present but celebrated. In this sense, Luoyang functioned as a truly international city—a historical *salad bowl* where numerous ethnicities and traditions coexisted in a harmonious yet distinct plurality.

Emperor Xuanwu's Trade Policy and the Influx of Western Regions' Merchants

After Emperor Xiaowen's transfer of the capital from Pingcheng to Luoyang, wars of various scales continued between Northern Wei and Southern Qi (479–502). Southern Qi, founded by Xiao Daocheng, succeeded the Liu Song dynasty and was later succeeded by the Liang dynasty, representing the ongoing confrontation between the Northern and Southern regimes. This means an increase in military spending. An imperial edict was issued on May 31, 495, to reduce the salaries of unnecessary officials who were not actively engaged in government affairs, thereby reallocating funds to cover rising military expenses (WS, 7xia/177). Due to increasing financial demands, Emperor Xiaowen reduced the annual salaries of all officials by one quarter, reallocating the funds to cover war expenses. This reduction continued until Yu Zhong (于忠), the Commander-in-chief of the Guard Corps, known in Chinese as *lingjun jiangjun* (領軍將軍), came to power and reinstated the original salary levels (WS, 31/743).

However, these reductions in expenditures were not limited to official salaries. On August 5, 498, an imperial edict was issued to curtail the living expenses of the empress, concubines, and members of the royal family within the five kinship domains, called wufu (五服), by half. Simultaneously, the expenses provided to imperial family members were reduced by one-third to fund the ongoing campaigns against the South (WS, 7xia/184).

Yuan Xie (元勰), Prince of Pengcheng (彭城王) and the younger brother of Emperor Xiaowen, received an enfeoffment of 2,000 households (WS, 21xia/571) and served closely during the imperial tours and wars. He insisted on donating one year's revenue, including his state stipend (國秩), professional salary (職俸), and kinship allowance (親恤), to cover the pressing military and war expenses of Northern Wei (WS, 21xia/571). According to Hu Sanxing's annotation to the *Comprehensive Mirror in Aid of Governance* (ZZTJ), these three categories of income defined the financial standing of a Northern Wei prince: *Guozhi* was the territorial income derived from the Pengcheng fief, present-day Xuzhou (徐州) in Jiangsu province (江蘇省); *zhifeng* was the professional compensation for holding a specific government post; and *qinxu* was the 'kinship allowance,' consisting of gifts and wealth granted directly by the sovereign to support the royal family's prestige (ZZTJ, 141/4429).

Yuan Cheng (元澄), Prince of Rencheng (任城王) and grandson of Emperor Jingmu (景穆帝), held the position of Vice-President of the Department of State Affairs and guarded Luoyang during the Yuan Hong's campaign against Southern Qi. He also pledged to donate the linens and silks collected from his enfeoffment in Rencheng for one year to support military expenses. The merciful emperor, however, accepted only half of that amount, showcasing the mutual respect between the sovereign and his kin (WS, 19zhong/469).

The biographies of Prince of Rencheng record that his donation was made between Mu Tai's (穆泰) rebellion in 496, the resistance by some members of the Xianbei ruling class against the transfer of the capital to Luoyang, and Emperor Xiaowen's second campaign against Southern Qi, which ended on February 17, 499 and was followed by his visit to Ye

(鄴), the former capital of Cao Cao regime, Later Zhao, and Former Yan. It may be closely related to the measure that reduced the income of the empress and royal concubines and government officials (Choi 2016, 301–03).

During the reign of Emperor Xuanwu, when the war with Liang was constant, the military expenditures increased. In 509, an imperial edict was issued ordering the manufacture of weapons for an army of 40,000 soldiers. This move reflected the intensified military efforts under Emperor Xuanwu's reign and the continuous need for advanced equipment to sustain the empire's defensive and offensive capabilities (WS, 8/207–08).

Although Emperor Xiaowen ordered governors Mu Liang (穆亮) and Li Chong (李沖), Dong Jue (董爵), to rebuild Luoyang, he did not remain in the new capital city. He kept focusing on the southern front and provincial inspections. He visited Ye and stayed there, where the palace had just been completed (WS, 7xia/173). Adequate residential and administrative facilities were not yet available in Luoyang, which had been devastated by continuous warfare since the Troubles of the Yongjia period (永嘉之亂, 307–17). Accordingly, he had to order the city reconstruction while he was conducting the costly war. Capital construction progressed slowly because the Emperor had set the war against Southern Qi as his top priority.

According to WS, Jinyong Palace (金墉宮), a fortress located in the northwest corner of Luoyang that combined palace functions with defense facilities, was completed on September 25, 495. It was the first building constructed in Luoyang, highlighting the city's early role as a military hub (WS, 7xia/178). On the same day, the buildings of the National Academy (國子學), the Imperial Academy (太學), and the Royal School of Four Gates (四門小學) were also erected in Luoyang (ZZTJ, 140/4389). Six years later, on October 3, 501, Emperor Xiaowen accepted Yuan Jia, Prince of Guangyang (廣陽王) and governor of Sizhou (司州牧)'s proposal to build 323 wards (坊) in Luoyang city, and ordered fifty thousand men mobilized from Sizhou (司州) around Luoyang to complete it in just forty days (WS, 8.194; ZZTJ, 144/4498). It took seven years to build Luoyang's wards after the transfer of the capital (Liu 1992, 418). According to the ZZTJ, the next year, on December 24, 502, the royal palace in Luoyang was completed (ZZTJ, 145/4527). In other words, the Luoyang palace was completed eight years after the capital was transferred from Pingcheng to Luoyang. This surge in spending was likely due to the concurrent conduct of the war with Southern Qi and the construction of Luoyang. The convergence of these two high-cost endeavors led to massive financial outlays, which explains why the state was forced to curtail officials' salaries and imperial living expenses during this period.

Emperor Xuanwu, Emperor Xiaowen's son, built three stone monuments at Yique Mountain (伊闕山), south of Luoyang, for his father, for Gao Zhaorong, his biological mother, and later for himself. This site is known as the Longmen Caves (龍門石窟). To construct the cave shrine known as Binyang Cave (賓陽洞) in this site, a total of 802,366 laborers were mobilized between 500 and 523 (WS, 114/3043). As this number testifies, a lot of manpower and materials were mobilized for the construction of Luoyang City, including palaces and the the monuments and the caves. Emperor Xuanwu, who faced financial difficulties due to the war and engineering works, had no choice but to seek to increase financial revenue. In this regard, the record in the Treatise on Economics in WS attracts attention.

> "After Wei's virtue expanded, people coming from the Western Regions and the Eastern Barbarians offered goods and filled the royal treasury. In addition, mutual trade (互市) was established along the southern frontier to allow goods from southern China to arrive, and materials such as feathers, ivory, and leather came from far away." (WS, 110/2858).

According to the above quote, the Northern Wei government gained economic profits through trade on three fronts, excluding the nomadic North, to the extent of enriching the imperial storehouses with various goods. However, from the beginning, the Tuoba dynasty exported white silk and various types of silk fabrics, embroidered silk goods, and silver to Central and Western Asia, including the Sasanian Empire, and imported various medicines, including herbal medicines. Also, the nine types of salt, originally from the Sasanian Empire, were already in use at the end of the Taipingzhenjun reign era (太平眞君) (440–51), the fifth reign-name of Emperor Taiwu (Sato 1981, 282–93). This trade was essentially analogous to the later silk-for-horses exchanges between the Tang dynasty and the Turks or Uighurs. Since its formative period, Northern Wei had actively traded with Central Asia, the Sasanian Empire, and the Eastern Roman Empire, with silk remaining the principal export product. This early integration into the Silk Road network allowed Northern Wei to amass significant wealth and exert cultural influence far beyond its borders.

According to the Treatise on Economics in WS, in 514, Emperor Xuanwu developed the silver mines of Li Mountain near Chang'an and Baideng Mountain in Hengzhou (恒州), the prefecture established in Pingcheng (WS, 110/2857). The background to the development of silver mines can be found in Keishiro Sato's research, which noted that the ruling class of the Northern Wei dynasty was interested in silver and the silver trade. The year 514, when the development of silver mines was attempted, roughly coincides with the era (517–22) when envoys of the Sasanian Empire frequented the area. It also corresponds to the year of the accession of Khosrow I (reigned 531–79), who minted large quantities of Drachm (Dirham) silver coins and expanded their circulation during the heyday of the Sasanian Persia. His establishment of the silver standard ensured the dominance of Persian currency in international trade, directly impacting the financial landscape of neighboring regions, including Northern Wei. Sato also found in the 10th century Arab records that China's exports, namely a hundred thousand pieces of white silk, one million pieces of silk fabrics, half a million pieces of embroidered silk goods, one million pieces of various horse gears, and one million pieces of silver, were traded between Northern Wei and Sasanian Persia (Sato 1981, 282–83, 288–91). Sato's finding implies that the implementation of the Equal-field System did not signify a singular push toward an agricultural economy. On the contrary, the Northern Wei government remained deeply committed to mercantile accumulation, financing its grand state projects—war and urban development—through extensive foreign trade.

This suggests that the Northern Wei's economic identity was defined more by its role as a commercial hub than by its agrarian reforms. At least, Emperor Xuanwu, pursued a commercial empire, not an agricultural country.

Also, according to the Treatise on Economics in WS, which further reflects his mercantilist orientation, Emperor Xuanwu ordered more than 1,000 households in Hanzhong (漢中) to engage in gold washing along the Hanshui River (漢水). This large-scale mobilization for precious metal extraction demonstrates that the state was not merely content with agricultural taxes, but was aggressively seeking to bolster its treasury with liquid assets to sustain its military and administrative expenditures (WS, 110/2857). Although all dynasties of pre-modern China developed gold, silver, and copper mines, the fact that this was recorded specifically in the Treatise on Economics would have seemed strange even to Wei Shu (魏收), a Chinese official and historian who compiled it. I argue that the emperor's attempt to increase gold production was also aimed at increasing state revenue. According to the Biography of Goguryeo in WS, Goguryeo sent 200 *jin* (斤) of yellow gold and 400 jin of white gold to the Northern Wei dynasty during the reign of Emperor Taiwu (WS, 100/2214–15). During the reign of Emperor Xuanwu, Goguryeo sent Ruixifo (芮悉弗) saying that Goguryeo would be unable to pay the gold, but the emperor, the son of a Goguryeo woman, refused the excuse (WS, 100/2216). His obsession with securing gold stemmed from his belief that such efforts were essential to the policy of wealth accumulation. For him, gold was not just a precious metal but a vital means of increasing state revenue. This interpretation frames his gold-panning initiatives as a deliberate fiscal strategy designed to bolster the empire's economic strength. In this sense, he may have been a mercantilist, predating European monarchs by more than a thousand years.

Northern Wei's financial gains also expanded due to the Goguryeo's active trade policy and encouragement of foreign trade. This can be confirmed by Censor-in-Chef and Shangshu (尚書) Xing Luan's (邢巒) memorial to the throne.

> "At the beginning of the Jingming (景明) era (500–503), his reign was peaceful, and the territory in all directions was peaceful, so merchants from countries far and near came and gathered. At this time, foreign tribute envoys passed the road, and merchants came in turn. Their exchange of goods grew *more than twice the usual amount.*" (Emphasis added; WS 65/1438)

The quote above notes that the trade revenue from foreign merchants was more than twice the ordinary amount. This means it was more than the revenue from agricultural products, such as the land tax paid by peasants. According to previous research, since the Jingming era, Emperor Wuanwu's first reign name, exchanges between the Tuoba empire and the Western Regions reached a peak, and the former gained enormous economic benefits through trade with the latter (Shi 2007, 159). This is also confirmed by artifacts excavated from Luoyang.

A gold coin of Anastasius I, the Eastern Roman emperor who reigned from 491 to 518, excavated from Mabo Village (馬坡村), north of current Luoyang city (Yang 2008, 34a–34b) and a gold coin discovered in a grand tomb of Northern Wei in Hengshandalu (衡山大路), presumed to be the tomb of Emperor Jiemin (節閔帝) (Liu and Yan 2014; Li 2014, 58), were evidence that merchants from the Eastern Roman Empire, Sassanian Empire, or Central Asia traveled to and from Luoyang to engage in trade, purchasing silk and making payments. From a modern perspective, it can be argued that the Tuoba empire maintained a consistent trade surplus through its extensive international trade.

Thanks to the trade encouragement policies initiated by the seemingly mercantilist emperor, Luoyang became a magnet for international trade. Merchants from the Western Regions, such as Eastern Rome, Sassanian Empire, and Central Asia, flocked to the city. The Record of Longhua Temple (龍華寺) in the LQJ, there is describes the activities of Western Regions' merchants.

> "The western barbarian immigrants were made to stay in Yanziguan (崦嵫館), and houses were given to Muyili (慕義里). People from many

countries and cities, from the Western Regions of the Pamir Plateau to the Eastern Roman Empire, happily came to the land of Northern Wei, and merchants from the Western Regions rushed to the border every day, so it could be said that the entire heavenly land was completely filled. Countless people settled in China because they liked the local atmosphere. Accordingly, the number of people who settled there exceeded ten thousand families. The gates were kept open, lined up one after another, with the shade of green locust trees was cast on the road, and green willow trees were cast in the yard. All items that were difficult to obtain under heaven were also found here." (LQJ, 3/161).

According to the above quote, merchants from various countries to the west of Northern Wei, and from cities scattered across the Western Regions of the Pamir Plateau to the Eastern Roman Empire, lived in Luoyang, well-stocked with precious materials, and engaged in trade. The Northern Wei government facilitated their residence in Yanziguan, one of the so-called state guesthouses of the four barbarians. From the quote above, we can see that merchants from the Western Regions (present-day Central Asia), Iran, and others resided in Luoyang for trade. It is presumed that the ancestors of He Shikai (和士開), who were merchants from the Western Regions (Bei Qi Shu 50/686), also lived in Luoyang (Chen 1987, 300). Historical evidence provides another example of this cross-cultural exchange: Luo Ling is recorded to have taught Cao Poluomen (曹婆羅門) how to play the mandolin of the Western Regions during Northern Wei. It is also said that a merchant from Kucha is related to Cao Poluomen and the mandolin anecdote (*Jiu Tang Shu* 29/1069).

Evidence of the merchants and officials from the Western Regions who lived in Luoyang is also found in many epitaphs. According to the epitaph of Kang Po (康婆) from the Tang dynasty, his great-great-grandfather Kang Luo (康羅) moved to Luoyang during the reign of the sixth emperor of Northern Wei, and resided in Luoyang thereafter (Zhou 1992).[6] In addi-

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6 "Datang gu Kangfujun muzhiming" 大唐故康府君墓誌銘 (Zhou 1992), Zhengguan 貞觀 139, 96.

tion, Kang Po's surname was explicitly linked to Kangguo (康國), which corresponds to present-day Samarkand in Uzbekistan, or to Kangju, the nomadic state in current Kazakhstan. The epitaph of An Jing (安靜) records that his ancestors lived in Zhounan (周南), current Luoyang city, Henan province, during the period of Northern Wei (Zhou 1992).[7] In accordance with Chinese historiographical tradition, it was customary to assign foreigners surnames by adopting the first character of their country's Chinese name, written in Chinese characters. Thus, Judging from the surname 'An,' his ancestors must have been from Anguo, that is to say, current Bukhara, Uzbekistan, or Anxi, the Chinese name of Parthia Empire. The Biography of Anguo in *Book of Sui* records that Anguo's manners and customs were the same as those of Kangguo (83/1849), so the Anguo people, like the Kangguo merchants, must have been skilled in commerce and engaged in international trade across Central Asia and other regions (WS, 102/2281–82).

Conclusion

Luoyang served not only as the capital of the Northern Wei dynasty but also as a cosmopolitan hub. It was a place where Xianbei rulers, Chinese officials, Central Asians, and Goguryeo peoples lived alongside Turkic nomads, Arabs, and even people of African descent. According to the LQJ, Luoyang's population was recorded at approximately 109,000 households, a figure that included a remarkably diverse array of residents. Among them, about ten thousand households were Central Asians, and three thousand households were capitulants from the Southern Dynasties. It appears that foreigners and non-local residents together accounted for at least 11.9%. The most populous group in Luoyang was probably the Xianbei people, who moved from Pingcheng to the city.

Luoyang functioned as a vibrant *salad bowl* of Eurasia, where peo-

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7 "Datang gu Kangfujun muzhiming" 大唐故康府君墓誌銘 (Zhou 1992), Zhengguan 貞觀 059, 267.

ple from China, Mongolia, Manchuria, Central Asia, and India coexisted within a rich multicultural tapestry. The city's landscape was a striking blend of Confucian administrative structures and majestic Buddhist temples, while its social life pulsed with the energy of nomadic and Central Asian influences. From the flavors of Silk Road cuisines and the rhythms of Central Asian music and dance to the spectacles of royal hunts and foreign acrobatics, Luoyang represented a unique historical moment of total cultural synthesis. The Sitong Market was a symbol of the cosmopolitan city and a place for multi-racial residents' meetings and economic exchanges. Central Asian goods were traded in the Sitong Market and consumed by the Tuoba rulers. In short, Luoyang emerged as the preeminent cosmopolitan precursor to the Tang dynasty's Chang'an.[8] This global status was achieved through a unique synthesis of the Xianbei rulers' relative openness toward their multi-ethnic subjects and Emperor Xuanwu's proactive trade policies. These factors acted as a powerful magnet, drawing Central Asians, Indians, and Arab traders into the empire's heart. By integrating these diverse populations, Luoyang established the structural and cultural foundations of the internationalism that would later define the height of the Tang Empire.

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8 I believe that Pingcheng, the capital in the first half of the Northern Wei dynasty, is the first truly international city. However, unfortunately, there are no records showing the population numbers or population ratio of foreigners, non-Xianbei or non-Chinese in Pingcheng, so it is difficult to classify it definitively as an international city. Although Luoyang, the capital of Northern Wei, and Chang'an, the capital of Tang, shared the commonality of being international cities, it cannot be concluded that the two had a succession relationship. Although some scholars claim that Northern Wei's Luoyang influenced Tang's Chang'an, Northern Wei reused the capitals of the Later Han and Wei dynasties and built a walled urban structure consisting of a palace city, an inner wall, and an outer wall, whereas Sui built a new capital city called Daxing, which had the same name but was different from the Western Han capital of Chang'an, and Tang merely inherited it. Chang'an under the Sui and Tang dynasties has a triple-walled structure in appearance, too. But it differs from Northern Wei in that it consists of a palace city, an imperial city, and an inner wall, and lacks an outer wall. Although the capital of the Tang dynasty, is said to be an international city, the proportion of foreigners or non-Han ethnic minorities residing there is unknown, and aside from exotic religious temples, it is difficult to view it as a city of cultural coexistence. An anonymous reviewer argued that the structure of Luoyang City built by Emperor Yang of Sui and Luoyang City of Northern Wei should be compared, but the two differed in location, urban structure, and degree of urban planning.

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The Nguyễn Dynasty's Policies on State-organized Maritime Transport, 1802–1858

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Abstract

The period 1802–1858 was one in which the Nguyễn dynasty exercised full independence in formulating and implementing its policies, and the state's policies had not yet been strongly influenced by the French colonial invasion of Vietnam. During this time, the Nguyễn court clearly recognized the importance of maritime transport in facilitating the circulation and redistribution of grain and material resources from various regions to the capital, as well as between provinces. On this basis, the Nguyễn emperors promulgated comprehensive policies to organize the annual maritime transport of state goods, elevating maritime transport to the level of a "matter of national importance." This article seeks to examine, in a systematic and comprehensive manner, the Nguyễn dynasty's policies on state-organized maritime transport during the period 1802–1858, thereby elucidating both its large scale and its particularly important role under the Nguyễn dynasty.

Keywords

The Nguyễn dynasty, state-organized maritime transport, policies of the Nguyễn dynasty, maritime transport, waterway transport, Đại Nam.

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Introduction

From its establishment in 1802 until the French invasion of Vietnam in 1858, the Nguyễn dynasty possessed and administered a vast, unified territory and maritime domain, with a coastline extending from north to south, much as it does today, thereby conferring significant advantages in marine resources and geostrategic position. In addition, along the length of the country, dense river networks—such as the Red River system, the Thái Bình River system, the Mã River system, the Cả River system, and the Cửu Long (Mekong) River system—linked the inland regions to the sea, providing highly favorable conditions for waterborne transport, including the state-organized maritime transport system of the Nguyễn dynasty.

Agriculture was highly valued by the Nguyễn dynasty, and rice constituted the principal staple of the realm. The country's two major granaries were the northern and southern deltas, while the imperial capital at Huế was located in the central region; consequently, the adequate provisioning and storage of grain in the capital became an urgent priority from the outset of the dynasty. At the same time, variations in soil and climate across regions—and even uneven soil fertility among provinces within the same region—affected agricultural productivity. In his study, Choi Byung Wook notes that "The balance between supplies and consumption of rice in the northern and central regions of Vietnam was dependent on southern rice. This situation began in the nineteenth century, when southern rice played a key role in the state economy," and that "The larger land, Gia Định, has very fertile soil and produces more grain than in any other region [in Vietnam]" (Choi 2004, 69, 71). Consequently, the redistribution of grain and material resources from the regions to the capital, as well as among provinces, was of considerable importance. Maritime transport not only ensured supplies for the court, the capital, and the provinces, as well as storage and reserves, and facilitated the circulation and balancing of resources across provinces, but also supported social relief efforts—particularly grain provision during times of famine and crop failure—and contributed to defense and security preparedness.

Map 1. ***Đại Nam nhất thống toàn đồ*** **[Complete Map of Unified Đại Nam]**
Source: *Tập bản đồ hành chính Việt Nam* [*Administrative Atlas*], Nhà xuất bản Bản Đồ [Cartographic Publishing House].

The Nguyễn court clearly and repeatedly recognized the particular importance of maritime transport. In practice, the Huế court adopted a strategic approach to reserve accumulation, aimed at redistributing and balancing grain and material resources among provinces and regions nationwide, while maintaining proactive readiness in food, finance, and weaponry. In the year Bính Tuất (1826), *Bộ Hộ* (Board of Finance) memorialized Emperor Minh Mệnh, emphasizing that "establishing safeguards is the foremost task in governing the state; ensuring ample reserves is essential for preparedness. When resources are available, anxiety naturally subsides; only by planning ahead can lasting stability be secured" (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2004, Vol. 2: 524). Transport operations were thus elevated to a "matter of national importance," with maritime transport as the most advantageous route—despite risks such as storms, reefs, sandbanks, and piracy—and, at times, the only viable means, when overland routes were obstructed by mountainous terrain, for conveying large quantities of grain and goods to the capital and to the provinces.

The Nguyễn court organized state maritime transport on an annual basis under rigorous administration, resulting in a systematic and effective operation. A set of policies was promulgated to strengthen state maritime transport, particularly under the reign of Emperor Minh Mệnh, when these measures were most systematic, stringent, and effective. The regulations governing state maritime transport were formulated through major court deliberations, underscoring its critical importance to the Nguyễn court. Among these, the deliberations of the year Kỷ Hợi (1839) were particularly noteworthy, involving *Bộ Hộ, Bộ Binh* (Board of Warfare), *Bộ Công* (Board of Construction), together with the *Ty Tào chính*, and resulting in a structured regulatory framework for annual transport operations along both the northern and southern routes. *Ty Tào chính* was a state administrative body responsible for state waterborne transport (particularly maritime transport) and waterborne commerce (including ship taxation), in accordance with regulations issued in the year Quý Tỵ (1833) (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2004, Vol. 3: 919). However, its primary function was to oversee and implement state waterborne transport policies and to manage shipping-related affairs (Dinh Thi Hai Duong 2018, 11).

Some Vietnamese and international scholars have shown interest in ships and shipbuilding, waterborne transport, and transport regulations under the Nguyễn dynasty.[1] Existing studies have examined such regulations during the reign of Emperor Gia Long or have addressed certain aspects of transport under the Nguyễn dynasty, such as ships and shipbuilding in the Mekong Delta in the early nineteenth century, and shipbuilding and maritime capabilities in Đại Nam during the Tự Đức era. However, no study has yet systematically and comprehensively addressed the Nguyễn dynasty's policies governing state-organized maritime transport between 1802 and 1858, in order to clarify and evaluate the considerable scale and particular importance of this transport.

This article, therefore, provides a systematic and comprehensive examination of state-organized maritime transport policies under the Nguyễn dynasty between 1802 and 1858, a period during which the French colonial invasion had not yet started, and the Vietnamese dynasty exercised full independence in policymaking. In doing so, the study highlights the extensive scale and critical importance of state maritime transport operations, particularly their role in sustaining the rule of the Nguyễn dynasty, safeguarding national security and defense, and maintaining socio-economic stability in Vietnam during the first half of the nineteenth century. The article also demonstrates how these policies and regulations affected Vietnamese society, especially coastal and riverine communities directly involved in and affected by state-organized maritime transport activities. More broadly, by highlighting the crucial importance of state-organized maritime transport, the article also reveals the significance of maritime policies and regulations of the Nguyễn dynasty during the first half of the nineteenth century. Based on primary sources, including *Đại Nam thực lục* [*The Veritable Records of Đại Nam*] and *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* [*Official Compendium of Institutions*

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[1] See, for example, Trương Thị Yến (2002), Trương Thị Yến (2004), Taga (2018), Li Tana (2004), Đỗ Bang (2019), Chen Wen et al. (2025), among others.

and Usages of Đại Nam], this article focuses specifically on the Nguyễn state's maritime transport policies for state goods and materials. It excludes domestic and overseas official sea missions undertaken by Nguyễn dynasty officials.

The Nguyễn Dynasty's Preparations for Transport Vessels

Until the first half of the nineteenth century, vessels remained a highly mobile, widely used, and effective means of maritime transport in Vietnam. The Nguyễn state placed considerable emphasis on preparing vessels for transport operations, particularly through their mobilization, repair, and construction. A wide variety of Vietnamese vessels were mobilized for transport, including state vessels (*thuyền công*), transport vessels under *Ty Tào chính* (*thuyền Tào*), and private vessels. State vessels, owned by the government, were stationed in the imperial capital, *Phủ Thừa Thiên* (*Thừa Thiên* prefecture) in central Vietnam, and various *trấn* (military provinces) and *tỉnh* (provinces).[2] Large or relatively large and sturdy state vessels were typically assigned to carry military equipment, money, and heavy materials such as timber and stone, while fast and light state vessels transported state grain, including rice and unhusked rice. In terms of construction, vessels engaged in state maritime transport operations included wooden vessels—such as *thuyền Hải Vận* (maritime transport vessels), *thuyền Ô* (black junks), and *thuyền Lê* (carved and decorated galleys)—and copper-sheathed vessels bearing the character designations "Bình" (*thuyền hiệu chữ "Bình"*), "Định" (t*huyền hiệu chữ "Định"*), and "An" (*thuyền hiệu chữ "An"*). *Thuyền Ô* and *thuyền Lê* were typically dispatched by the emperor to escort maritime grain convoys and conduct maritime patrols.

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2 In 1831–1832, Emperor Minh Mệnh implemented administrative reforms at the sub-central level, replacing the *"trấn"* (military provincial units) with *"tỉnh"* (provincial units). The provincial administrative system was thereafter maintained throughout the Nguyễn dynasty.

Figure 1. ***Thuyền*** **Ô engraved on the** ***Dụ Đỉnh*** **at the Imperial City of Huế**
Source: Photograph by Bùi Gia Khánh, in Bùi Gia Khánh, *Thủy quân triều Nguyễn* (1802–1884) [*The Nguyễn Dynasty Navy* (1802–1884)], 2018.

Figure 2. ***Thuyền Lê*** **engraved on the** ***Tuyên Đỉnh*** **at the Imperial City of Huế.**
Source: Photograph by Bùi Gia Khánh, in Bùi Gia Khánh, *Thủy quân triều Nguyễn* (1802–1884) [*The Nguyễn Dynasty Navy* (1802–1884)], 2018.

The state-owned vessels employed in state-organized maritime transport were typically sturdy craft capable of carrying large quantities of cargo, including vessels bearing the character designations "Định" and "An," as well as fast seagoing vessels such as *thuyền Hải Vận* and *thuyền Bình Hải* (*Bình Hải* vessels). However, the principal category of vessels responsible for state-organized waterborne transport operations was *thuyền Tào*, which specialized in the waterborne carriage of state grain (rice and unhusked rice) and state revenues (currency). In the year Mậu Tý (1828), Emperor Minh Mệnh issued an edict stipulating that only especially valuable items or heavy cargo beyond the carrying capacity of *thuyền Tào* were to be transported by state vessels from *doanh* (military camps) and *trấn* to the imperial capital. Other cargo was to be handled by *Bộ Công* in consultation with the *Ty Tào chính*, and on the basis of reports (*tờ tư*) from *Bộ Hộ*. Prepared in the winter of each year, the reports specified the types and quantities of cargo to be shipped and the categories of vessels to be deployed for the state's maritime transport operations in the following year. *Bộ Công* would then compile another report (*tập tâu*) for submission to the throne and await the imperial decision (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, Vol. 8: 504–05).

From the early years of the Nguyễn dynasty, Emperor Gia Long established a semi-professional transport system comprising the *Trường đà groups of waterborne transport vessels* (*đội thuyền Trường đà*), staffed by coastal and riverine inhabitants organized into corvée labor units (*đội công sai*) and placed under the administration of the *Bộ Công* (Trương Thị Yến 2002, 17; Trương Thị Yến 2004, 95). In the year Bính Tuất (1826), under Emperor Minh Mệnh, this system was reorganized into *Tào fleets* (*Tào thuyền, đoàn thuyền Tào*) under the *Ty Tào chính*. These fleets operated under fixed quotas to ensure that a predetermined number of vessels were available each year for the state's maritime transport operations, thereby helping to stabilize the transport system.

Under the reign of Emperor Gia Long, when the *Trường đà* functioned as the specialized agency responsible for the state's maritime transport operations, the transport vessels of the various *trấn* were organized into the *đội thuyền Trường đà* under the *Southern and Northern*

Trường đà (*Trường đà Nam and Trường đà Bắc*), which oversaw and expedited transport operations. In the year Bính Tuất (1826), after Emperor Minh Mệnh reorganized the system as the *Ty Tào chính,* the northern and southern transport vessels were divided into two Tào fleets: the Southern Tào fleet and the Northern Tào fleet. These comprised nine flotillas in the former and eight in the latter. In the year Kỷ Dậu (1849), Emperor Tự Đức established the Vĩnh Hòa flotilla from Lý Hòa village (Quảng Bình province) under the Northern Tào fleet, thereby completing the fixed quota of nine flotillas for each fleet. Each of the Southern and Northern Tào fleets was thereafter organized into nine flotillas, each comprising roughly twenty vessels. The officials *Đốc vận* (an official position charged with escorting transport fleets, sixth rank, first class (Đỗ Văn Ninh 2002, 243)) and *Lĩnh/Lãnh vận thiên tổng* (an official position of the Southern and Northern Tào divisions directly responsible for riverine and maritime transport operations (Đỗ Văn Ninh 2002, 395), seventh rank, second class) accompanied the fleets to supervise operations and oversee one another (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, Vol. 8: 493; Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2004, Vol. 2: 488).

Privately owned vessels mobilized by the state for maritime transport included *thuyền ứng ban* (officials' privately owned vessels mobilised for state-organized transport), *thuyền đại dịch* (corvée-service vessels)[3], *thuyền miễn dịch* (exempt-service vessels)[4], *thuyền ván đi buôn* (plank-built merchant boats), *thuyền nan đi buôn* (bamboo basket trading boats), *thuyền đánh cá* (fishing boats), and *thuyền đội nước mắm* (boats of the fish sauce transport team; also referred to as boats of the

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3 *Thuyền đại dịch* (corvée-service vessels) were privately owned vessels that voluntarily paid annual port taxes in order to be exempted from state transport service (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, Vol. 8: 495). Choi Byung Wook (2004, 72) notes that "*đại dịch thuyền* (rice transportation junks on behalf of government)."

4 *Thuyền miễn dịch* (exempt-service vessels) were privately owned vessels that petitioned to pay *chuyên tiền* on an annual basis in order to be exempted from state transport service (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, Vol. 8: 496). *Chuyên tiền* may have been a form of monetary payment made in order to obtain exemption from corvée labour, thereby exempting vessels from compulsory state transport service.

fish sauce tribute transport team). Private vessels and those of *Tào* fleets operated on a rotational basis: in one year, they provided transport services; in the following year, their owners made a commutation payment that exempted them from such service, allowing them to engage in trade or fishing. However, during periods of large-scale transport operations, the court mobilized all the aforementioned categories of vessels, whether state-owned or privately owned, large or small, fast or slow, for maritime transport service. At such times, privately owned vessels that had already made the commutation payment were to be compensated (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, Vol. 8: 472–73, 504–06). Vessels that evaded transport duties faced a monetary penalty calculated according to their carrying capacity [three *quan* (long strings of cash coins)[5] per *thùng*[6] (grain storage bin)], and the vessel owner was also punished with one hundred strokes (*phạt đánh trượng*) and required to undertake transport service in the following year. If the owner again evaded transport in the subsequent year, the penalty was sixty strokes and one year of penal servitude (*tù khổ sai*); the vessel was confiscated for state use, and the owner was permanently prohibited from building boats [according to the regulation issued in the year Bính Tý (1816)].

In addition to regulations on the aforementioned types of transport vessels, the state imposed strict rules on measuring vessel dimensions, issuing vessel licenses, and maintaining vessel registers (Nội các triều

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5 *quan/quan tiền*: In the Chinese monetary system, 100 *đồng* (cash coins) constituted 1 *tiền* (short string of cash coins). In the Vietnamese monetary system, however, 1 *tiền* (short string of cash coins) could comprise either 36 *đồng* (cash coins), referred to as *Sử tiền* (also known as *Tiền gián*), or 60 *đồng*, referred to as *Cổ tiền* (also called *Tiền quý*). Accordingly, 10 *tiền* of *Sử tiền* were also termed 1 *quan* (long string of cash coins) of *Sử tiền*, equivalent to 6 *tiền* of *Cổ tiền*. Conversely, 10 *tiền* of *Cổ tiền* amounted to 1 *quan* 6 *tiền* 24 *đồng* (Nguyễn Minh Tường 1996, 270).

6 1 *thùng* = 57 *phương* 9 *thăng* (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, Vol. 8: 481). According to the regulations of the Nguyễn dynasty, the basic units of capacity measurement (primarily used for measuring various types of grain) were as follows: 1 *hộc* = 2 *vuông* (*phương*) = 76.226 litres; 1 *phương* = 13 *thăng* (*thưng*) = 38.133 litres; 1 *thăng* = 10 *cáp* = 2.932 litres; and 1 *cáp* = 0.2932 litres. In addition, there were other units of capacity, such as 1 *bát* = 2.54 litres and 1 *uyển* = 1.27 litres, which were used for measuring rice (Đỗ Bang 2019, 28).

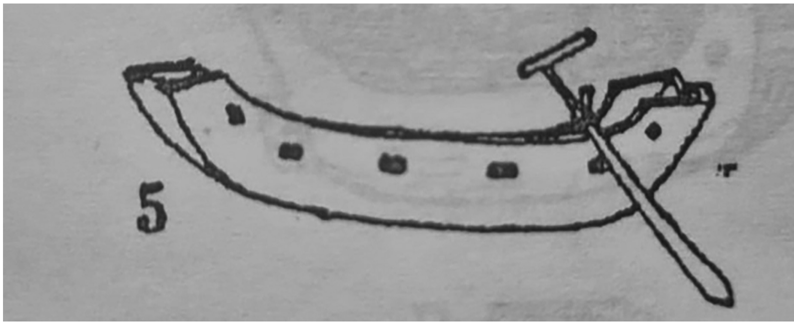

Figure 3. *Thuyền tam bản*, a boat made of three planks (sampan)
Source: Pierre Huard and Maurice Durand, *Vietnam Civilization and Culture*, 284.

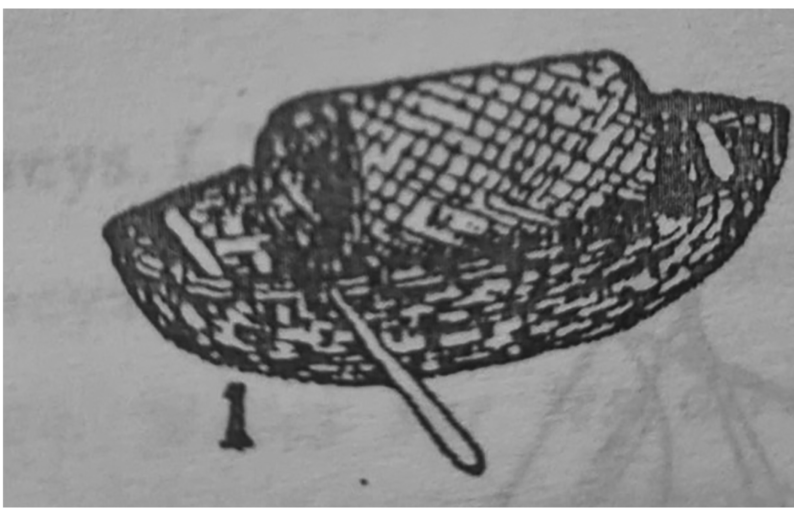

Figure 4. *Thuyền nan or thuyền thúng*, a boat made of bamboo lamellae coated with lacquer
Source: Pierre Huard and Maurice Durand, *Vietnam Civilization and Culture*, 284.

Nguyễn 2005, Vol. 8: 499–503). In years when vessels were required to perform transport service, officials of the *doanh* and *trấn* issued permits authorizing their operations. In years when they were allowed to pursue their regular occupations (such as trading and fishing), officials endorsed their travel passes with a one-year authorization. To better regulate navigation, ensure security and defense, and levy taxes on merchant vessels, the Nguyễn dynasty established Tấn, riverine and maritime gateways, and appointed officials as Tấn thủ to staff these posts (Đinh Thị Hải Đường 2014, 28–29). When vessels entered and exited these coastal gateways, the *Tấn thủ*, together with the *Xã trưởng* (Commune Head) and the *trùm trưởng* (a title within the village governance apparatus), conducted inspections; vessels lacking an endorsed pass were seized, and their owners were brought before the *doanh* or *trấn* authorities to be charged with evading state transport obligations. Officials who let ships that had dodged state transport obligations anchor at the coastal gateways were punished with up to one hundred strokes. In cases where officials accepted bribes or deliberately tolerated such violations, they were charged with "violating the law" and punished severely. The officials of the *doanh* and *trấn* were also punished with fifty strokes, commutable to a six-month salary deduction, a penalty six degrees lighter than that imposed on the offender (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, Vol. 8: 504).

The involvement of private vessels in the transport and storage of goods in state granaries reflects that state vessels alone were insufficient to meet transport demands, and that the Nguyễn dynasty had to rely on the inhabitants for maritime transport operations. Fluctuations in the number of vessels assigned to transport duties across different years and reigns likewise reflect variations in the volume of goods transported, as well as uneven levels of agricultural production and economic development over time. Furthermore, the regulation requiring private vessels to pay a commutation tax in lieu of transport duties reduced the income of maritime traders and fishermen, contributing to state treasury revenues. Vessel-owning households also lost part of their working time each year by participating in transport service, while the freight payments they received were lower than the commutation tax. In this way, the state's maritime transport policy affected the livelihoods of the coastal population.

The Nguyễn dynasty paid considerable attention to the repair and construction of state vessels for transport. Major and long-established shipyards in Gia Định, Quảng Nam, and especially Huế, together with newly established yards in Nghệ An, Thanh Hóa, Nam Định, and elsewhere, built state vessels, including those employed in the Nguyễn dynasty's maritime transport of state goods (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, Vol. 7: 257–61; Nguyễn Văn Đăng 2004, 22–23; Chu Thiên 1961, 48).[7] In addition, according to Đỗ Bang, "in the nineteenth century, the number of privately owned trading vessels increased significantly, leading to the emergence of well-known shipyards such as Lý Hòa (Quảng Bình), Trà Quân, Kim Bồng (Hội An), and Duy Vinh (Duy Xuyên) in Quảng Nam" (Đỗ Bang 2019, 16). Pierre Huard and Maurice Durand provide further information on the Hà Mật shipyard: "The Hà Mật naval dockyard employed 4,000 workers and could construct ships of 400 tons with iron wood and occidental forms" (Huard and Durand 1954, 279). In some years, the Nguyễn dynasty built between 100 and 150 *thuyền Hải Vận*, whereas in other periods, only a few were constructed. Large, sturdy vessels were also built for transport operations, overseas missions, and maritime security and defense.

A notable feature of shipbuilding under the Nguyễn dynasty was the incorporation of Western-style techniques. This can be observed in both state-owned vessels and those constructed by local inhabitants, as recorded in the accounts of John White[8]—an American merchant who visited Vietnam in late 1819 and early 1820—as well as in the observations of George Windsor Earl, who described a vessel used by the inhabitants of Cochinchina in Tringanu (i.e., Terengganu) in 1833[9], among other sources. Li Tana similarly concludes that "the most distinctive development of Cochinchinese marine technology of this period was perhaps in a few types of warships, galleys, and ships. What most distinguishes these vessels from those of other Asian countries at the time was

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7 See also Li Tana (2004, 122) and Nguyễn Đình Đầu (1987, 252, 308) among others.

8 "The king has also a fleet of gallies at Huè, and was building, in 1819, two hundred more, some of which were pierced for fourteen guns. Of this number, about fifty are schooner-rigged, and constructed partly in the European style: their sterns are completely European, while their bows are a mixture of that and the Onamese model" (White 1824, 264–265).

9 "In the afternoon a Cochin Chinese vessel came into the river from Anam, laden with salt and rice. She was about fifty tons burthen, built after a European model, and with the exception of the Batavian fishing-boats, appeared to be better adapted for fast sailing than any native vessel I had hitherto seen" (Earl 1837, 191).

the Cochinchinese adaptation, from the final decades of the eighteenth century, of Western-style shipbuilding techniques” (Li Tana 2004, 132).

Drawing on the distinctive characteristics of vessels operating along maritime and riverine routes, the early Nguyễn emperors introduced a number of innovative ideas and solutions to improve shipbuilding techniques. These measures enhanced the efficiency of waterborne transport while ensuring the flexibility and maneuverability of vessels in Vietnam, a country with a long coastline and an extensive river network connected to the sea. One notable innovation was the design and construction of vessels equipped with two rudders: a long rudder for maritime navigation and a rounded rudder for riverine sailing. This shipbuilding technique was inherited from the achievements of the Lord Nguyễn Ánh era, owing to its practicality and effectiveness (Trịnh Hoài Đức 2005, 203). Over time, vessels in service were also repeatedly improved by the state to address the shortcomings of earlier construction methods. Nevertheless, these improvements remained limited.

The Nguyễn dynasty placed considerable emphasis on shipbuilding techniques that produced fast, light, and maneuverable vessels for both maritime transport and military operations. The court repeatedly introduced technical improvements in ship construction to meet the demands of transport and military operations. Under the reign of Emperor Minh Mệnh, the vessels bearing the character designation “Bình,” constructed to a new design in the year Tân Mão (1831) for the maritime transport of timber, also reflected an innovative modification, with the partition planks between compartments removed to allow an unobstructed interior, enabling the vessels to accommodate long timber planks and thereby making transport faster, more convenient, and significantly more efficient than the traditional method of rafting (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2004, vol. 3: 182; vol. 4: 689). By the year Ất Mùi (1835), the vessels bearing the character designations “Bình,” “Định,” “An,” and “Tĩnh,” (*thuyền hiệu chữ* “*Tĩnh*”) together with the *Điện Hải* vessels (*thuyền Điện Hải*) in the capital and the provinces, were constructed according to a new design, moving away from the earlier construction technique characterized by a relatively low bow and stern. According to the regulations issued in the year Kỷ Hợi (1839), vessels of crude design and slow performance, such as the Thanh Dương vessels and the six units bearing the designation "Tuần Hải," were ordered by Emperor Minh Mệnh to be dismantled and re-planked. The Thanh Loan vessels and the vessels bearing the designation "Định Hải" were constructed according to a new design, featuring a broader hull and emphasizing skillful handling and light, rapid movement (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2004, vol. 5: 544).

The state also ensured the careful selection of shipbuilding materials from the finest available resources, including timber for hull planking, masts, and knees (*tay co*); iron for manufacturing rudders, anchors, and ship nails; and hemp bark for making ropes and hawsers (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2004, vol. 4: 471–72, 686, 997; vol. 5: 557) ... The construction and repair of vessels were closely supervised by the court to ensure quality, particularly with respect to vessels' critical components (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2004, vol. 5: 606, 863–64).

Under the Nguyễn dynasty, steam-powered vessels appeared and represented the most advanced type of vessel, one that had not previously been part of the Vietnamese navy up to the early nineteenth century (Nguyễn Phan Quang 2002, 90). Copper-sheathed vessels served effectively in official maritime missions, particularly in long-distance overseas voyages. Wooden vessels, meanwhile, were widely used in maritime transport, coastal patrols, and official missions abroad, such as the vessels bearing the character designations "Định" and "Tĩnh." In the year Mậu Tuất (1838), for the first time under the Nguyễn dynasty, Emperor Minh Mệnh purchased a used French steam-powered vessel and ordered it to be dismantled for study as a model for experimental construction, completed in the early months of the year Kỷ Hợi (1839). The construction of steam-powered vessels was costly, and consequently, only a small number were built under the Nguyễn dynasty. Between 1839 and 1844, the court built only four steamships at the shipyards in Huế. Under the reign of Emperor Tự Đức, apart from the steamship Mẫn Thỏa, which was built under the oversight of Hoàng Văn Sưởng and Lê Bân with British assistance, the court relied on purchasing steamships from abroad rather than building new ones domestically (Trần Đức Anh Sơn 2014, 69–73).

As a result of the active preparation of transport vessels, a large number of vessels were mobilized for the Nguyễn dynasty's state transport operations in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the twelfth month of the year Mậu Thìn (1808), Phạm Đăng Hưng—Vice Minister of the Board of Personnel (*Tham tri Lại bộ*), concurrently in charge of the *Trường đà*—submitted to Emperor Gia Long a register reporting the annual inventory of vessels from the various *dinh*, *doanh*, and *trấn*. The register recorded a total of 3,460 vessels, including 78 tax-exempt vessels, 425 vessels assigned to transport service, and 2,957 vessels exempt from transport duties. In addition, the commutation payments in lieu of transport service together with harbor taxes amounted to more than 17,700 quan (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2004, vol. 1: 742). According to the official quota in the year Mậu Tý (1828), Emperor Minh Mệnh maintained a total of 1,061 state vessels, including 951 within the regular quota (*thuyền nội ngạch*) and 110 outside it (*thuyền ngoại ngạch*)[10]. Under the reign of Emperor Minh Mệnh, more than 250 vessels of the *Nam Tào* and *Bắc Tào* fleets were dispatched for state transport duties (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 3: 172).

Regulations on Maritime Transport Volumes

Goods transported by sea for state transport purposes were highly diverse, including rice, unhusked rice, money, timber planks, stone, weapons, prisoners, and local products. Among these, rice and unhusked rice constituted the principal items of state transport and were subject to an annual transport quota. They were shipped from *Bắc Kỳ* (the northern region of Vietnam) and *Nam Kỳ* (the southern region of Vietnam) (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 473–77), the latter primarily from Gia Định,

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[10] These figures are calculated by the author from data on quota regulations for state vessels in the capital and in the localities in the year Mậu Tý (1828), under Emperor Minh Mệnh, as recorded in Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn, Đại Nam thực lục [Veritable Records of Đại Nam], vol. 2 (Nhà xuất bản Giáo dục, 2004), 797–799.

to the capital in order to meet the daily needs of the emperor and the royal family, as well as to supply the granaries of the imperial capital and the central regions. Of these sources, *Bắc Kỳ* served as the principal and most regular supplier.

This situation can be explained by the fact that *Bắc Kỳ* and *Nam Kỳ* possessed extensive and fertile lands conducive to agricultural development, whereas the harsher soils and climate of *Trung Kỳ*(the central region of Vietnam) constrained agricultural productivity. The Red River Delta, long settled and relatively stable, supported multiple rice crops each year, yielding high output and good-quality rice; it thus became the principal source of grain for the granaries of the imperial capital. The Vietnamese settled in *Nam Kỳ* later than in *Bắc Kỳ*, and the area was frequently disturbed by incursions from Siamese forces and raids by upland and frontier groups. In the early 1840s, growing tensions in relations between Đại Nam and Siam led to warfare in *Nam Kỳ*, which had a significant negative impact on agricultural production there. At the same time, the Nguyễn court had to devote considerable resources to warfare, including costly military supplies. Consequently, in the years Tân Sửu (1841) and Nhâm Dần (1842), Emperor Thiệu Trị exempted *Nam Kỳ* from the obligation to transport grain, with the sole exception of Gia Định, which continued to supply rice for the emperor's consumption owing to its abundant production of high-quality grain. Nevertheless, social and security conditions in *Bắc Thành* (administrative-military jurisdiction exercising authority over eleven *trấn* in northern Vietnam) under the Nguyễn dynasty were far from entirely stable, as numerous popular uprisings continued and the livelihood of the population remained precarious. In this sense, the regulation also reflected a degree of preferential consideration by the court towards *Nam Kỳ*.

When effectively implemented, the state-organized maritime transport system helped ensure the smooth movement and secure storage of grain, enabling the imperial capital and the provinces to maintain a stable supply of rice. This was particularly important in years of poor harvests, when reserves could be drawn upon to provide relief grain to the population. In this way, the system contributed to social stability and political order, as famine was one of the major causes of peasant uprisings against the Nguyễn dynasty.

In addition to rice and unhusked rice, large quantities of state goods—particularly heavy items such as weapons, timber planks, and money—were transported by sea, thereby easing the burden of overland transport. For example, in the eleventh month of the year Quý Tỵ (1833), Emperor Minh Mệnh ordered naval soldiers to sail on the vessel bearing the character designation "Định" No. 7, to transport firearms, ammunition, and gunpowder to the military establishment (*quân thứ*) at Gia Định. The shipment comprised one cannon named "*Phá địch đại tướng quân*" ("Great General for Defeating the Enemy"), 400 explosive shells (*chấn địa lôi*) measuring 4 *tấc* 2 *phân* in diameter, and 50,000 *cân*[11] of gunpowder (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2004, vol. 3: 887). In the third month of the year Canh Tý (1840), the emperor assigned Phạm Văn Cục, Commander of the Imperial Navy Guards (*Chưởng vệ Thuỷ sư Kinh kỳ*), to take charge of *thuyền Hải Vận* and the Northern Tào fleet. They were tasked with transporting 840,000 *quan* from the imperial treasury to Nam Định for transfer to Hà Nội, and subsequently shipping rice and goods from *Bắc Kỳ* back to the imperial capital (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2004, vol. 5: 673). In the year Kỷ Hợi (1839), the total volume of cargo transported from various regions to the imperial capital in accordance with established regulations reached nearly 40 million *cân*. The cargo included rice, unhusked rice, timber planks, and other regional products and materials (see Table 1). This figure reflects the vast scale of state maritime transport in the year Kỷ Hợi (1839), during the reign of Emperor Minh Mệnh.

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[11] Under the Nguyễn dynasty, two systems of weight measurement were in use: the *Thiên bình* scale, employed for measuring ordinary goods, and the *Trung bình* scale, used for weighing gold, silver, and currency. According to Nguyễn regulations, ordinary weight was calculated using the units *tạ, yến, cân, lượng, đồng cân*, and *phân*, with the following conversions: 1 *tạ* = 10 *yến* = 60.4 kg, 1 *yến* = 10 *cân* = 6.04 kg, 1 *cân* = 16 *lượng* = 0.604 kg, 1 *lượng* = 10 *đồng cân* = 0.03775 kg, 1 *đồng cân* = 10 *phân* = 0.003775 kg (Đỗ Bang 2019, 29).

Table 1. Volume of state goods transported by sea from the northern region (*Bắc Kỳ*) and the southern region (*Nam Kỳ*) to the capital under the regulations issued in the year Kỷ Hợi (1839)

Northern region (*Bắc Kỳ*)				**Southern region (*Nam Kỳ*)**					
Annual total prescribed transport load of vessels[12]	**Annual total weight of goods requiring transport**[13]	**Annual weight of each category of goods requiring transport**		**Annual total prescribed transport load of vessels**	**Annual total weight of goods requiring transport**	**Annual weight of each category of goods requiring transport**			
		Rice	Local produce and state goods			Unhusked rice	Rice	Local produce	Timber planks
More than 29,467,200 cân (vessels also carried iron, bricks, and cash if the prescribed transport load had not yet been fully utilized)	**25.435.300 cân**	500.000 phương	(No precise figures were recorded)	**More than 17,980 cân** (vessels also carried timber planks and rice if the prescribed transport load had not yet been fully utilized)	14,469,700 cân and timber planks	100.000 hộc	10 phương	(No precise figures were recorded)	(No precise figures were recorded)

Source: Prepared by the author based on Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2004, *Đại Nam thực lục,* vol. 5: 579–580.

With regard to the carrying capacity of vessels, the state stipulated that it be calculated on the basis of vessel size, as determined by the di-

[12] Transport load of vessels: the prescribed total load that vessels were required to carry, comprising the cargo to be transported together with the weight of provisions, personal belongings, and other necessities of the transport and escort personnel on board; the latter constituted the deductible allowance.

[13] Weight of goods requiring transport: the actual weight solely of the goods (rice in the husk, husked rice, local products, and other items) to be transported from the provinces to the capital or to other localities, excluding the weight of the provisions, personal belongings, and other necessities of the transport and escort personnel on board.

mensions of the vessel's beam. As early as the year Đinh Mão (1807), Emperor Gia Long issued strict regulations specifying the quantity of goods to be transported by vessels with beams ranging from 7 to 20 *thước*.[14] By the year Kỷ Dậu (1849), Emperor Tự Đức revised these tonnage regulations, applying them to vessels with beams from 7 *thước* to 17 *thước* 9 *tấc*, with permitted cargo capacities set at approximately twice those prescribed for vessels of the same size under Gia Long's reign (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 503–04). These regulations helped prevent vessels from being overloaded, ensured the safety of maritime transport, and enabled the state to more effectively control fraudulent reporting of vessels' carrying capacity, as well as estimate the number of vessels engaged annually in state transport operations. The Nguyễn court also instituted transport depreciation allowances for vessels to account for losses arising from adverse sea conditions and the prolonged duration of voyages at sea (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 480–81, 483).

Regulations on Transport Remuneration (freight rates) and Payments for Exemption from the State Water Transport Service

In years when *thuyền Tào* and privately owned vessels were mobilized for state-organized maritime transport, they were remunerated for their carriage services. Such remuneration could take various forms, in accordance with the regulations issued by the monarch for that year: in kind (rice and unhusked rice), in cash, half in cash and half in silver, or partly in grain and partly in cash. Freight rates also varied from one reign to another. Even within the same reign, different rates were applied according to carrying capacity, transport distance (long or short), transport destina-

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14 According to the regulations of the Nguyễn dynasty, the system of length measurement based on the carpenter's rule (*thước mộc*) was as follows: 1 *trượng* = 10 *thước* = 4.25 metres; 1 *tầm* (*ngũ*) = 5 *thước* = 2.215 metres; 1 *thước* = 10 *tấc* = 0.425 metres; 1 *tấc* = 10 *phân* = 0.0425 metres; 1 *phân* = 10 *ly* = 0.00425 metres; and 1 *ly* = 0.000425 metres (Đỗ Bang 2019, 25).

tion (the capital or the provinces; a single destination or multiple destinations), and the type of vessel employment (*thuyền Tào* or privately owned vessels) (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 481–83).

With regard to payments for exemption from state transport service, under the reign of Emperor Gia Long, the payments required for exemption from such transport, with respect to the two categories of vessels—*thuyền đại dịch* and *thuyền miễn dịch*—were relatively high and set at different levels. Owners of *thuyền đại dịch* voluntarily paid annual port taxes (*thuế cảng*), while owners of *thuyền miễn dịch* applied to pay *chuyên tiền* annually to obtain exemption from state waterborne transport service. *Chuyên tiền* was calculated in relation to the grain transport capacity of transport vessels; for instance, according to the tax regulations of the year Bính Tý (1816), a levy of two *quan* was imposed for every 57 *phương* 9 *thăng* of capacity (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 496). By the year Bính Thân (1836), Emperor Minh Mệnh stipulated that *thuyền miễn dịch* were to pay *chuyên tiền* according to vessel beam dimensions, at a lower rate than that applied to *thuyền đại dịch* in the fifteenth year of Gia Long's reign (1816). In the second year of Emperor Tự Đức's reign (1849), a uniform tax rate was established for both categories of vessels, with the levy being significantly more lenient than in previous reigns (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 495–97).[15]

The Nguyễn dynasty stipulated that the taxes payable for exemption from state transport service were not high for plank-built merchant boats (*thuyền ván đi buôn*), bamboo-built merchant boats (*thuyền nan đi buôn*), and fishing boats, as these were generally small in size and typically served as the everyday means of subsistence for local inhabitants. For boats of the same dimensions (for example, those with beam dimensions ranging from 7 *thước* to 10 *thước* 9 *tấc*), *thuyền nan đi buôn* and fishing boats were subject to lower tax rates than *thuyền đại dịch* and *thuyền miễn dịch* (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 497–99).

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15 On the system of payments collected in lieu of state transport service, see Taga (2018).

Regulations on the Duration of Maritime Transport

The Nguyễn dynasty attached great importance to regulating the timing of maritime transport in accordance with seasonal wind patterns and sea currents. Delays in transport could have serious consequences: missing the favorable monsoon would halt transport operations, while encountering the storm season would make navigation difficult for transport vessels; moreover, risks such as shipwreck, loss of cargo, and loss of life were difficult to avoid. The scheduling of maritime transport was generally uniform across the reigns; however, it was most strictly enforced under the reign of Emperor Minh Mệnh. Under the regulations issued in the year Bính Thân (1836), vessels assigned a single annual voyage were to depart after the Minor fullness of grain (*tiết tiểu mãn*)[16] in the fourth lunar month and return around the *Summer Solstice* (*tiết hạ chí*) in the fifth. Vessels undertaking two voyages were scheduled to depart around the *Grain Rain* (*tiết cốc vũ*) in the third lunar month and return by minor fullness of grain for the first trip, and to depart before the summer solstice and return around the *Great Heat* (*tiết đại thử*) in the sixth lunar month for the second. Each round trip was limited to forty-two days, with ten days allotted per instance for the receipt or delivery of cargo to state granaries (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 479–80).

Ty Tào chính, local officials (*quan địa phương*), and maritime-gateway officials (*quan trông coi cửa biển*) were responsible for guiding and expediting transport vessels in accordance with seasonal wind and tidal patterns so as to ensure transport was carried out on schedule. Under the regulations of the year Kỷ Hợi (1839), prior to each maritime transport season, *Ty Tào chính* informed localities of the vessels and the transport quotas to be undertaken by the Southern and Northern Tào divisions

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[16] Minor fullness of grain (*tiết tiểu mãn*): a solar term occurring approximately on 21–22 May in the Gregorian calendar; Summer solstice (*tiết hạ chí*), approximately on 21–22 June; Grain rain (*tiết cốc vũ*), approximately on 20–21 April; Great heat (*tiết đại thử*), approximately on 23–24 July; Grain in ear (*tiết mang chủng*, also rendered *tiết mang hiện*), approximately on 6–7 June (Nguyễn Công Việt 2013).

(*Nam tào* and *Bắc tào*). Subsequently, local officials notified maritime-gateway officials, who were tasked with verifying each vessel from their locality designated for transport—whether present locally or engaged in trade or fishing elsewhere—as well as vessels from other localities currently at their ports that were likewise assigned to transport duties. Following this verification, maritime-gateway officials reported to provincial authorities, who in turn submitted reports to *Ty Tào chính*. Vessels assigned to transport duties were required to return to their home localities in order to meet the prescribed schedule (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 505–06).

According to the regulations of the years Bính Thân (1836) and Kỷ Hợi (1839), prior to each transport season, local officials were required to submit memorials requesting the court's approval regarding the number of voyages and the quantity of goods to be transported. Thereafter, these were assigned to the transport vessels, and the transport vessels were urged to carry out the transport to meet the prescribed delivery deadlines. Militiamen (*dân binh*) mobilized by local officials were also required to assist in loading and transporting state goods, thereby enabling the work to proceed more rapidly. In cases where the transport supervisors (*người quản giải*) willfully caused delays, both the local officials and the supervisors were to investigate one another's conduct. Where delays resulted from the offices concerned, the matter was to be deliberated and adjudicated by the Board (*Bộ*) (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 480). Many merely formal procedures were also reduced, thereby saving transport time (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 479–80). All of the above regulations were ultimately intended to ensure that transport operations were carried out at the proper season, when winds and sea currents were favorable.

Regulations Governing Transport Personnel

The maritime transport forces under the Nguyễn dynasty had not yet been fully separated into a specialized corps, but instead remained a multifunctional force, serving simultaneously in waterborne transport and naval roles. With regard to the officials and troops responsible for supervising transport operations, Emperor Minh Mệnh instituted supervisory positions for the *Nam Tào* and *Bắc Tào fleets*, each fleet being assigned one Chief Commandant (*Chánh quản lĩnh*) and one Deputy Commandant (*Phó quản lĩnh*); one Clerk (*Thư lại,* ninth rank, second class) for record-keeping; and one *Đốc vận* together with one *Lĩnh vận thiên tổng* to oversee and urge transport operations. In the *doanh* and *trấn*, civil officials were charged with maintaining registers and recording transported goods, while military officers familiar with maritime routes commanded the soldiers escorting transport vessels. In the *trấn* under Gia Định Thành, however, either civil or military officials, together with representatives appointed by Gia Định Thành—a southern administrative-military jurisdiction exercising authority over five *trấn* in southern Vietnam—supervised transport operations, and *doanh* and *trấn* officials were not required to take turns accompanying the convoys.

Transport commanding officers (*quan lĩnh tải*) and transport supervisory officers (*quan quản tải*) were competent and experienced maritime officers with extensive knowledge of navigation who held important military positions and were responsible for commanding and supervising transport convoys. Under the regulations of the year Kỷ Hợi (1839), transport missions comprising three vessels or more were overseen by one court-appointed *Quản giải*—typically a competent *Quản vệ* or *Quản cơ*.[17] In *Nam Kỳ*, local authorities dispatched a *Lãnh binh*[18] or *Phó lãnh binh* to serve as

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[17] According to Đỗ Văn Ninh, under the Nguyễn dynasty, *cơ*-level military units were established in the provinces: in the northern region these were termed *cơ,* while in the southern region they were known as *vệ*. Each *cơ* consisted of 500 men. Below the *cơ* were *đội, thập*, and *ngũ*. Each *đội* comprised 50 men, each *thập* 10 men, and each *ngũ* 5 men. *Chưởng cơ* was a high-ranking military official in command of a *cơ* unit (Đỗ Văn Ninh 2002, 146). *Chưởng vệ* (second rank, first class) was a high-ranking military official commanding a *vệ* unit under the Nguyễn dynasty (Đỗ Văn Ninh 2002, 149). *Quản cơ* (fourth rank, first class) was a relatively high-ranking military official commanding a cơ unit under the Nguyễn dynasty. Below this position was one *Phó Quản cơ* (deputy to the *Quản cơ*) (Đỗ Văn Ninh 2002, 535).

[18] *Lãnh binh*: a military official commanding provincial troops under the Nguyễn dynasty. In major provinces (*tỉnh lớn*), one Đề đốc or Lãnh binh was appointed (first rank, third class). In ordinary

Thống quản, whereas in *Bắc Kỳ* the emperor selected one or two officials from among *Thống chế*[19] or *Chưởng vệ* to act as *Đốc quản* and carry out transport command duties (see Table 2) (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 477–79).

Table 2. Number of officials and soldiers assigned to each state water transport vessel under the regulations of the year Kỷ Hợi (1839)

Transport personnel (officials and soldiers)	Vessel types			Convoy of state transport vessels
	thuyền Hải Vận (maritime transport vessels)	**thuyền hiệu chữ "Tĩnh"** (vessels bearing the designation "Tĩnh")	**thuyền hiệu chữ "An"** (vessels bearing the designation "An")	
Number of transport commanding officers[20] per state transport convoy				1
Number of transport supervisory officers[21] per state transport convoy (≥ 3 vessels)				1
Number of *Suất đội* (deputy commanders of *đội* units) per vessel	1	1	1	
Number of helmsmen per vessel	2	2	2	
Number of soldiers per vessel	30	40	50	

Source: Prepared by the author based on Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2004, *Đại Nam thực lục*, vol. 5: 580.

provinces (*tỉnh vừa*), one *Lãnh binh* or one *Phó lãnh binh* was appointed (third rank, second class). In strategically important areas such as Thanh Hóa and Nghệ An provinces, the rank was at times elevated to the second rank, second class. In the 19th year of the Emperor Minh Mệnh reign, it was reduced to the same level as in other provinces (Đỗ Văn Ninh 2002, 394). *Phó lãnh binh*: a military official commanding provincial troops under the Nguyễn dynasty, third rank, second class. In major provinces, both a *Lãnh binh* and a *Phó lãnh binh* were appointed. In ordinary provinces, either a *Lãnh binh* or a *Phó lãnh binh* was appointed (Đỗ Văn Ninh 2002, 495).

19 Under the Nguyễn dynasty, *Thống chế* (second rank, first class) was a high-ranking military official in command of a *doanh*-level military formation comprising five vệ units (Đỗ Văn Ninh 2002, 692–693).

20 In *Nam Kỳ*, *quan lĩnh tải* were placed under the authority of a *Lãnh binh* or *Phó lãnh binh* appointed by local officials at the points of delivery of state goods. In *Bắc Kỳ*, they were selected and appointed by imperial edict, following a petition from the *Bộ Công*, from among the *Thống chế* or *Chưởng vệ* to direct transport operations (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn (2004), *Đại Nam thực lục*, tập 5, Nhà xuất bản Giáo dục, Hà Nội, tr.580).

21 Transport supervisory officers (*quan quản tải*) were selected from *Quản vệ or Quản cơ.*

In response to the large number of privately owned vessels engaged in state-organized maritime transport, regulations promulgated under Emperor Tự Đức in the year Kỷ Dậu (1849) stipulated that each provincial flotilla of such vessels was permitted to select from among its own members one *thuyền hộ* (vessel owner or operator) to serve as flotilla leader, responsible for leading the transport flotilla. The appointee was required to be alert, experienced, and well-versed in maritime transport and navigation, as well as to possess proper identification. Upon appointment, the provincial authorities issued him an official certificate authorizing him to act as flotilla leader (*người quản đoàn*), and he was exempted from payment of a tax in commutation of military service (*thuế binh giao*).

In provinces where privately owned transport vessels were numerous and organized into two or more flotillas of *thuyền đại dịch* and *thuyền miễn dịch*, one *Chánh Cửu phẩm Bá hộ* (Ninth rank first class *Bá hộ*—an official title within the nine-rank system) was appointed to supervise and lead them. During the first three years, he served in a probationary capacity (*thí sai*). If his service proved satisfactory, he was then formally appointed (*bổ thụ*) as *Chánh Cửu phẩm Bá hộ* as a form of encouragement. He was likewise required to be alert, experienced, and well-versed in transport operations and maritime navigation, to possess proper identification, to be selected by provincial authorities from among the province's transport flotillas, and to command the respect of their crews (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 497).

In maritime transport voyages, the helmsman (*lái thuyền*) played a pivotal role, effectively serving as the "master" of the vessel (*"thầy ở một thuyền"*) (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 7: 268). Helmsmen assigned to state vessels dispatched from the capital were rigorously trained and underwent multiple rounds of assessment in maritime knowledge and navigational experience, on the basis of which they were ranked and appointed to positions such as *Chánh Đội trưởng* (principal commander of a military *đội* unit), *Đội trưởng* (commander of a *đội* unit), and *Ngoại ủy Đội trưởng* (lowest-ranking official within a *đội* unit) (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 7: 268).[22] Tasked with the crucial work of propelling the vessel, the number of sailors (*thủy thủ*, formerly termed *bạn phu*, also known as *chân sào*) per vessel was determined according to the cargo volume. For *Trường đà* vessels transporting state unhusked rice, loads of up to 1,000 *phương* required the addition of one rower for every extra 100 *phương*; for loads between 1,000 and 1,600 *phương*, ten additional sailors were assigned; while for loads exceeding 1,600 *phương*, previous regulations remained in force. Helmsmen and sailors received preferential treatment from the state. For example, under regulations issued by Emperor Gia Long in the year Ất Sửu (1805), the helmsmen and sailors of *đội thuyền Trường đà* were exempted from the poll tax (*thuế thân*) and customary payments to officials (*tiền đầu quan*). Emperor Minh Mệnh granted exemption from the poll tax to sailors serving the Northern Tào fleet who, in the year Đinh Hợi (1827), were permitted to defer the transport of state goods and engage in private trade. By contrast, vessels granted deferment of such transport obligations in that year because their sailors voluntarily remained in their home localities, were still required to pay the poll tax, although the sailors were exempted from *tiền sưu* (corvée commutation payment) and *tạp dịch* (miscellaneous service obligations) (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 494). A considerable number of soldiers (*biền binh*) were assigned to escort transport vessels and to safeguard cargo against unforeseen incidents at sea (see Table 2).

The rewards and punishments governing state-organized maritime transport operations were set out in stringent state regulations. These reg-

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[22] According to Đỗ Văn Ninh, Chánh Đội trưởng was a military official in command of đội units. The rank varied according to jurisdiction: Chánh Đội trưởng serving in the tổng were fifth rank, first class; those serving at the provincial level were fifth rank, second class; while Chánh Đội trưởng suất đội held sixth rank, first class (Đỗ Văn Ninh 2002, 127). Suất đội referred to a deputy commander of a đội unit. This position was classified as sixth rank, first class within the system of military official ranks. The head of this position was Chánh suất đội, fifth rank, second class (Đỗ Văn Ninh 2002, 566). Each đội in the Nguyễn military consisted of 50 men. The structure comprised one Cai đội, two Đội trưởng, and two Ngoại ủy Đội trưởng. The Đội trưởng of the imperial naval forces (Thủy sư kinh kỳ) in the capital were seventh rank, first class, while Đội trưởng in the provincial forces were seventh rank, second class (Đỗ Văn Ninh 2002, 244). Ngoại ủy Đội trưởng was the lowest-ranking official within a đội unit. Each đội had two Ngoại ủy Đội trưởng, who held positions below the Đội trưởng within the unit hierarchy (Đỗ Văn Ninh 2002, 437).

ulations not only served to encourage and incentivize officials and soldiers engaged in these operations—both materially and in terms of morale—but also to enforce discipline among them. At the same time, they reflected the court's close supervision over the transport and storage of state cargo, and underscore the importance attached to state-organized maritime transport operations.[23]

Regulations on Reporting Transport Operations

Maritime gateways served as sites where the state collected duties and controlled the movement of vessels, thereby contributing to maritime surveillance. They also functioned as temporary refuge and anchorage sites for vessels encountering adverse weather, as well as supply stations providing provisions, foodstuffs, and fresh water. Accordingly, the reporting of transport operations at these maritime gateways was of considerable importance. The Nguyễn court imposed strict regulations governing the reporting of vessels' transport itineraries, and intermediate maritime gateways.

According to regulations issued in the year Ất Mùi (1835), when provincial transport vessels carrying state goods arrived at the Thuận An maritime gateway, the *Tấn thủ* was required to prepare two copies of a report (*bản thân văn/tờ tâu*), to be transmitted to the capital via the *Ty Hộ vệ*[24]

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[23] The specific regulations governing rewards and punishments in state-organized maritime transport operations are recorded in *Khâm định Đại Nam hội điển sự lệ* (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 485–491) and *Đại Nam thực lục* (Quốc sử quán triều Nguyễn 2004, vol. 3: 48).

[24] The *Ty Hộ vệ* was one of the four offices of the *Vệ Loan giá* under the *Binh Bộ* (Board of Warfare). Its personnel attended upon the emperor on ceremonial occasions, such as royal observances, state sacrificial rites… and attended upon the emperor on provincial journeys. They fired ceremonial cannon salutes, stood guard at the *Thái Hoà Palace* and *Cần Chánh Palace*, and lit lamps in accordance with established regulations. Together with the guards of the *Vệ Cẩm y* (Imperial Guard), they opened and closed the *Đại Cung Môn* (the main gate of the Forbidden City). When the court travelled by water, they attended on duty to fire guns aboard the gun-equipped vessels. They were also assigned by rota to duty at the *Trấn Hải, Điện Hải*, and *An Hải* forts, where they hoisted flags and maintained firearms, and they monitored the telescope at the *Hải Vân quan* -

and the *Ty Cảnh tất*[25], with one copy submitted to the emperor and the other retained in the Office of *Ty Tào chính* (*Nha Tào chính*). Such reporting was required for each transport voyage. The officers in charge of two-masted vessels (*thuyền hiệu 2 cột buồm*), black junks, carved and decorated galleys, as well as the Southern Tào fleet and the Northern Tào fleet, were required, for each maritime transport voyage, to submit two copies of the report to the Bộ Công and the Office of *Ty Tào chính* (*Nha Tào chính*). In cases where only service vessels (*dịch thuyền*) (i.e. *thuyền đại dịch* (corvée-service vessels), *thuyền miễn dịch* (exempt-service vessels) and *thuyền Tào* were employed, the submission was to be made by the office of the *Ty Tào chính* (*nha môn Tào chính*), with the report retained solely in the *Bộ Công*. Where state vessels participated alongside the aforementioned categories, the *Bộ Công* was responsible for submission; in such instances, reports concerning *thuyền Tào* and *dịch thuyền* were to be retained in the office of *Ty Tào chính* (*nha môn Tào chính*) (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 484–85).

Given a large number of estuaries distributed along the coastline from north to south, and in order to avoid delays in state-organized maritime transport caused by repeated reporting at multiple coastal checkpoints, Emperor Minh Mệnh introduced a policy of designating intermediate estuarine checkpoints situated at midpoint locations along the maritime routes from both the northern and southern regions to the imperial capital of Huế. This arrangement helped to regularize and streamline administrative reporting procedures. According to the regulations promulgated in the year Ất Mùi (1835), Thị Nại estuary (in Bình Định province) was designated as the intermediate checkpoint for vessels transporting goods from Bình Thuận and the southern provinces to the capital, while

a land gateway on the *Hải Vân Pass* (Đỗ Văn Ninh 2002, 405–406; Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 5: 41–42, 86–87; Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 4: 16–22, 71–76).

[25] The *Cảnh Tất ty* was one of the four offices of the *Vệ Loan giá* under the *Binh Bộ*. It was responsible for guarding and securing the emperor when he travelled outside the palace, and its personnel attended upon him during court rituals and ceremonies (Đỗ Văn Ninh 2002, 120; Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 5: 41–42, 86, 87–88).

Biện Sơn estuary (in Thanh Hóa province) served as the intermediate checkpoint for vessels transporting goods from Nam Định and the northern provinces en route to the capital. On their journey to the imperial capital, transport vessels were required to make formal reports at these intermediate checkpoints, after which the authorities of Bình Định and Thanh Hóa were responsible for forwarding such reports to the imperial court in Huế (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 484).

The Nguyễn dynasty instituted specific regulations requiring distinct reports on the timing of transport vessels departing from estuaries. Prior to the year Kỷ Hợi (1839), the court required provincial authorities to submit reports under the ordinary administrative reporting procedure, or via official communication to the relevant Board, indicating the dates on which vessels transporting state goods departed from provincial estuaries en route to the imperial capital. However, this reporting practice often resulted in delays in the transmission of information to the court. Moreover, recognizing that "state cargo are matters of importance, and that information concerning state-organized maritime transport should be conveyed promptly to the sovereign," Emperor Minh Mệnh, in the year Kỷ Hợi (1839), instituted a distinct reporting regulation concerning the date and time at which transport vessels departed from estuaries. Under this new regulation, provincial authorities and the estuarine stations at Cần Giờ and Đà Nẵng were required to submit immediate reports to the capital in cases involving large convoys of transport vessels, including those under imperial commission, provincial assignment, grain-transport vessels, and service vessels,[26]... The exact date and time at which transport vessels departed from the estuaries were to be immediately recorded

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[26] Emperor Minh Mệnh issued specific regulations stipulating the number of transport vessels required for separate reporting under the established regulations, as follows: from three vessels or more for large-category vessels, such as multi-rope copper-sheathed vessels and vessels bearing the character designations "*Bình*," "*Định*," "*An*," and "*Tĩnh*"; from five vessels or more for middle-category-organizedrmstate-organizedobilizingy vessels, such as *thuyền Hải Vận* and *thuyền Điện Hải*; and from ten vessels or more for small-category vessels, such as *thuyền Lê*, *thuyền Ô*, chu thuyền (also termed son *thuyền*, a type of small red-painted craft), *thuyền Tào, dịch thuyền* (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 485; Bùi Gia Khánh 2018, 121).

in reports, which were then conveyed to the capital by relay post horses (*ngựa trạm*), so that the information would arrive swiftly. For smaller numbers of transport vessels, the previous regulations remained in force (Nội các triều Nguyễn 2005, vol. 8: 485).

Concluding Remarks

The Nguyễn dynasty promulgated a fairly comprehensive and well-structured system of policies and administrative measures governing state-organized maritime transport, characterized by rigor, administrative efficiency, and long-term effectiveness. The early Nguyễn emperors attached particular importance to state-organized maritime transport, prioritizing investment in its development and elevating it to the status of a matter of "national importance." It was regarded as one of the highest priorities, supported by careful planning and deliberation at court, together with the concerted involvement of administrative bodies and managerial personnel from the central government to the local level. All these efforts were directed towards the overarching objective of ensuring safe and reliable transport, thereby facilitating the movement and redistribution of grain (rice and unhusked rice), goods, and weaponry among regions—especially from the provinces to the imperial capital—while also ensuring adequate reserves. In doing so, the system contributed to the maintenance of food security, military preparedness, and, more broadly, social stability.

Accordingly, in practice, this policy made the Nguyễn dynasty's state-organized maritime transport more orderly and efficient. The dynasty's capacity to manage and utilize state-organized maritime transport made positive contributions to the country's political-military, economic, and social spheres, and played an important role in regulating grain distribution and safeguarding domestic food security. State-organized maritime transport not only facilitated the circulation, redistribution, and allocation of fiscal resources, grain, weapons, and other military supplies among regions, thereby ensuring adequate reserves and preparedness, but also enabled the timely provision of social relief, notably the distribution of grain, to the population in times of natural disasters, crop failures, and famine. At the same time, it also contributed to strengthening the naval forces and improving their maritime effectiveness. The management and utilization of state-organized maritime transport clearly reflected the Nguyễn dynasty's administrative thinking, strategic vision, and long-term approach to the effective exploitation of this resource, particularly under the early reigns of Emperors Gia Long and Minh Mệnh. Most notably, between 1802 and 1858, the policies enacted under Emperor Minh Mệnh were the most systematic, rigorous, effective, and long-lasting. However, the management and utilization of state-organized maritime transport declined markedly under Emperors Thiệu Trị and Tự Đức in comparison with the preceding reigns of Emperors Gia Long and Minh Mệnh.

Nevertheless, the Nguyễn dynasty's investment was still insufficient to meet the state's transport needs, particularly with regard to investment in transport vessels. The state's policy of mobilising civilian vessels for State-organized maritime transport also imposed certain constraints on the livelihoods of fishermen and merchants engaged in waterborne trade in coastal areas, as it required them to devote part of their annual working time to transport duties and to make payments for exemption from transport service to the state in years when they wished to pursue their usual occupations. At the same time, however, this policy also had certain unintended positive effects on the livelihoods of these communities, since participation in State-organized maritime transport enabled them to travel by sea to many other provinces and regions within the country, thereby giving them access to new places and additional opportunities to earn a living.

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The Impact of the Russo-Ukrainian War on East Asia and Southeast Asia:

From a rules-based international order to a "might-makes-right" international system

LAM Peng Er

Abstract

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the first major outbreak of war in Europe since 1945, has not only severely eroded the norms of a rules-based international order. It has also ushered in a more violent and coercive international system. The significant North Korean military involvement in the conflict, as evidenced in the deployment of thousands of North Korean troops to the Kursk Oblast in Russia against Ukrainian troops, means that the Russo-Ukrainian War is strictly no longer a European conflict. Arguably, the war is a catalyst for a strategic bipolarity in Northeast Asia: a triad of China, Russia, and North Korea poised against the alignment of the US, South Korea, and Japan. The middle powers in East Asia and Southeast Asia face the conundrum of maneuvering in an emerging power-centered "might-makes-right" international system as they seek cooperation and safety in numbers amid superpower competition.

Keywords

Russo-Ukraine War, "might-makes-right" international system, rules-based international order, North Korea, geo-strategic bipolarity in Northeast Asia

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Introduction

This article assesses the impact of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War on East Asia, namely, Northeast and Southeast Asia. Its central argument is that Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 catalyzed a fundamental shift from a rules-based international order to a "might-makes-right" international system. It is a shift with profound implications for the Korean Peninsula and its vicinity. This violent rupture in a 21st-century globalized world, hitherto governed by international law, international organizations, norms of state sovereignty underpinned by the United Nations, and great-power restraint on the exercise of brute military power, now moving towards a power-based international system, is subsequently aggravated by the US-Israeli wars against Iran from 13 to 24 June 2025, and again from 28 February 2026 onwards.[1]

Siding with Moscow in the Russo-Ukrainian War in a cynical bilateral exchange for material benefits and diplomatic support has emboldened and enabled North Korea—formally known as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)—to become a more formidable nuclear-armed state (Onchi 2026).[2] Despite overtures of engagement from the second Trump administration and South Korean President Lee Jae Myung, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has thus far ignored their olive branches in favor of relentlessly building the country's nuclear arsenal and conventional weapons. This is unsurprising, given Kim's profound distrust of the US superpower and its allies (including South Korea), as well as Pyongyang's strengthened strategic realignments with Russia and China. Simply put, due to North Korea's tightening alliance

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1 The US military action against Venezuela to kidnap Nicolás Maduro in January 2026 indicates the Trump administration's disregard and disdain for international law and its willingness to infringe state sovereignty.

2 The benefits accrued by North Korea are outlined in a Nikkei Asia article that states: "North Korea is enjoying an unprecedented windfall by providing military support to Russia in its invasion of Ukraine, having received foreign currency and energy supplies in exchange for weapons and troops. North Korea has earned up to $13 billion in three years, according to an estimate, an amount nearly equal to the country's annual gross domestic product" (Onchi 2026).

with Russia, it has less need to seek an uncertain rapprochement with the US and South Korea.

In the next decade, the Northeast Asian regional system is likely to be a bipolarity of two competing blocs: China, Russia, and North Korea versus the US, South Korea, and Japan (Kortunov 2023). The conundrum for these actors in Northeast Asia is how to avoid serious miscalculations and conflict while pursuing their national interests. Can conventional and nuclear deterrence work if dialogue and trust between the main protagonists are practically absent? Presumably, the Republic of Korea (ROK)—as South Korea is formally known—the US and like-minded countries should not give up engagement with the DPRK (even if results are uncertain) because a conceivable alternative is a catastrophic war on the Korean Peninsula with grave ramifications for East Asia. In an emerging and threatening "might-makes-right" international system, the middle powers such as the ROK, Japan, and some ASEAN member states must cooperate bilaterally and multilaterally for agency and mutual benefits amid great-power contestation.

This article will first examine the origins of the Russo-Ukrainian War. It will then analyze how this conflict has impacted and has had implications for China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and ASEAN. When the DPRK deployed thousands of troops to assist its Russian ally in the Kursk Oblast of Russia against Ukrainian forces, the war is no longer a European war. Instead, this significant North Korean military participation in the Russo-Ukrainian War has profound implications for the Korean Peninsula.

Woven into the above discussion will be brief references to the US-Israeli wars against Iran insofar as they have implications for the Russo-Ukrainian War and impact the Korean Peninsula and its neighborhood. Though the two wars in Eastern Europe and the Middle East have yet to conclude at the time of writing, this article argues that East Asian countries (despite their different regimes, values, and identities) must avoid the folly of war and should earnestly seek a path of mutual respect, common interests, toleration, and peaceful coexistence to avoid nuclear brinksmanship and annihilation.

Russo-Ukrainian War: Origins and Significance

On 24 February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine and triggered the largest and deadliest war in Europe since World War II (1939–1945). Earlier, Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in March 2014. However, it was a coup d'état with few lives lost rather than a major war. Russia controlled Crimea for around 170 years prior to the territory's transfer to Ukraine by the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev. Catherine the Great of Russia first annexed Crimea in 1783, and it remained part of Tsarist Russia and then the Soviet Union until it was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954. The Sevastopol Naval Base is the primary historic base of Russia's Black Sea Fleet located on the Crimean Peninsula. Simply put, Crimea belongs to Ukraine under international law, but the harsh reality is that the Russians have controlled Crimea since the late 18th century.

After the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, Ukraine inherited the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal, but it lacked operational control of the nuclear weapons that remained under Moscow's effective command. Under the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, all nuclear weapons in Ukraine were transferred to Russia by 1996. It is incorrect to say that if Ukraine had not given up its nuclear weapons, Russia would have been deterred from its invasion of its Eastern European neighbor. This is because Ukraine only stored the nuclear warheads in its territory; it never had the launch codes (Hodunova 2024).

Examining the causes of the Russo-Ukrainian War in depth is beyond the scope of this article. However, we can briefly triangulate three mutually reinforcing factors before refocusing on the implications of this European war for East Asia. First is the relentless eastward expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) after the end of the Cold War in 1991, to the chagrin of Russia (Walter 2025). Arguably, the US and its NATO allies were not respectful of Russia's national security concerns, nor did they understand that Russia's pride and identity as a great power would not allow it to tolerate Ukraine as a potentially hostile NATO member next to its border. Apparently, the Western allies underestimated Russia as a declining power and a paper tiger and were shocked that a major war could break out in Europe.

Second is the perception of President Vladimir Putin and many Russian political elites that "near abroad" countries (namely, the post-Soviet states other than Russia that emerged after the dissolution of the Soviet Union), especially Ukraine, must be friendly to Russia for their security (Fedorov 2024). Apparently, the latter holds the great-power mentality that the "near abroad" countries belong to Russia's sphere of influence. Most of Ukraine was under Russian control (Tsarist and Soviet) for more than 200 years before it became independent when the Soviet Union disintegrated.[3] Putin and his acolytes simply cannot accept that Ukraine, an integral part of the Tsarist and Soviet empires, will join the Western camp inimical to Russia.

Third is the intensifying political polarization in post-Soviet Ukraine. The fierce political contestation between the pro-Western and pro-Russian factions in Ukraine would draw the intervention of external powers.[4] If pro-Russian Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovych (2010–2014) had not been overthrown by the Euromaidan protests and fled to Russia, the Crimean crisis and subsequent Russo-Ukrainian War probably would not have broken out.

Notwithstanding Putin's trip to Anchorage, Alaska, to meet US President Donald Trump on 15 August 2025 and Trump's desire to end the Russo-Ukrainian War to focus on China (the only peer competitor in the world to the US superpower), the Russo-Ukrainian conflict may drag on as a long war of attrition for at least three reasons. The first reason is

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[3] Western Ukraine, including Galicia, were ruled as part of the Austrian Empire under the Habsburgs rather than as part of Russia. The Soviet Union annexed Western Ukraine in 1939.

[4] In his review of Russia and Ukraine: Entangled Histories, Diverging States (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2024) by Maria Popova and Oxana Shevel, Taylor McNeil wrote: "The book especially details domestic political events in Ukraine and Russia that led to the current situation. It shows how in Ukraine power went back and forth between politicians seeking to distance the country from Russia and those favoring closer connections with Russia—culminating in the Orange Revolution of 2004–2005 and Euromaidan demonstrations of 2013–2014—and how that affected Ukrainian-Russian relations, given how Russia interpreted these events" (McNeil 2024).

that Ukraine, aided by the West, has the iron will and capability to fight an asymmetrical war with Russia despite suffering great losses in lives and infrastructure. Its ability to adapt to an unprecedented major drone battlefield by harnessing and innovating artificial intelligence (AI) and robotic weapons is impressive indeed.

The second reason is the strong resolve of Putin and his supporters to prevail against Ukraine. Trump cannot compel Putin to abandon his war against Ukraine despite the former's initial bravado and bluster about mediating and ending the war quickly. Putin is playing a long game. Ironically, Trump's war in the Middle East and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz have resulted in higher energy prices—specifically for oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG)—which have enormously benefited Russia, a major energy exporter. Conceivably, Moscow now has more financial wherewithal to pay for its war against Ukraine. This includes rewarding North Korea for its dispatch of troops to the Kursk Oblast in Russia and workers to Russian-occupied territories in the Donbas region of Ukraine to assist in reconstruction efforts (Jang 2024).

Presumably, Russia has a geostrategic culture and historical mythmaking of fighting long wars of attrition and prevailing after initial severe losses and setbacks (Rumer and Sokolsky 2020). Peter the Great of Russia decisively defeated Swedish King Charles XII at the Battle of Poltava in 1709 after losing the Battle of Narva in 1700 against Sweden. Russia eventually defeated French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, despite losing the Battle of Austerlitz in 1805 and fighting the Battle of Borodino in 1812, which resulted in a stalemate. Russian troops were in Paris in 1814 and 1815–1818 (as part of the allied occupation). Stalin's Russia won a titanic struggle against Nazi Germany's Adolf Hitler when the latter launched Operation Barbarossa to invade Russia in 1941, and Russia held out against Nazi forces until Hitler's end in his bunker in Berlin in 1945. Simply put, there is a Russian collective memory that Mother Russia will arduously prevail in the long haul despite initial serious setbacks.

The third reason is China's "pro-Russia neutrality" and refusal to subject Russia to a humiliating defeat to please the US. Beijing and Moscow share the common goal of promoting a multipolar world and rejecting US unipolarity and hegemony in the international order. If Russia were to be severely emasculated by a military defeat in the Russo-Ukrainian War, China would lose Russia as an independent pole and partner in a multipolar world. The next geopolitical target of the US superpower would then be its only peer competitor in the world – China. International sanctions on Russia, such as its exclusion from the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) payment system, have limited efficacy due to enhanced economic cooperation, including Chinese energy purchases from Russia and the supply of critical dual-use goods by China to Russia (Fong and Maizland 2025).

According to the December 2025 US National Security Strategy, the geostrategic priorities of the US are defense of the Americas and the first island chain in East Asia comprising Japan, Taiwan, and the Philippines (The White House 2025). The US surgical strike in Caracas and the kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro by US Special Forces on 3 January 2026 are unfavorable to China because Venezuela is one of China's closest friends in Latin America. China is the largest buyer of Venezuelan oil and a major creditor. Iran is likewise one of the closest friends of China in the Middle East, as China was the primary global buyer of Iranian oil.

Presumably, Trump's military actions against close Chinese friends in the Global South, punitive trade tariffs, the ban on the sale of cutting-edge US semiconductors to China and the codification of a containment policy against China in the 2025 US National Security Strategy mean that China has no incentives to act against Russia, even though Beijing's declaratory policy is respect for state sovereignty. If the sanctity of state sovereignty and international law are paramount, then Beijing should have unequivocally condemned the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Yet China did not do so. If promoting a multipolar world is a top foreign policy in China's grand strategy, then it cannot abandon Russia and North Korea as counterbalances to the US and its allies. In June 2026, President Xi Jinping visited Pyongyang again for a summit meeting with Kim Jong Un, seven years after his last trip. Presumably, Beijing seeks to strengthen ties with the DPRK to keep it in its orbit and ensure that Pyongyang does not tilt too far toward Moscow.

Russo-Ukrainian War: Implications for China

While China—one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC)—supports state sovereignty in principle, it has adopted a "pro-Russian neutrality" rather than an even-handed treatment of Ukraine. In July 2025, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi candidly told a top diplomat from the European Union (EU) that Beijing cannot accept Russia losing its war against Ukraine, as this could allow the US to turn its full attention to China (Bermingham 2025). Both China and Russia have deepened their relations, as symbolized by Putin holding center stage with Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un at the impressive military parade at Tiananmen Square marking China's 80th anniversary of Victory over Imperial Japan on 3 September 2025. By appearing at the podium together, the leaders of China, Russia, and North Korea projected a united front in international affairs.

Although the Trump administration has imposed tariffs on India for buying Russian oil, it has not done likewise to China.[5] To be sure, US tariffs on Chinese products are already high without additional tariffs. But Beijing will not yield to the US on Russian oil and gas purchases, given its energy needs and close ties to Moscow. Amid the retaliatory closure of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran and the naval blockade by the US, which have disrupted the global energy supply chain, US allies (including Japan and South Korea) have been buying Russian oil and gas to make up the shortfall ("South Korea Joins East Asian Countries" 2026). Trump's state visit to meet Chinese paramount leader Xi Jinping in Beijing on 14–15 May 2026 did not place the Russo-Ukrainian War or re-

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[5] Mollan's article for the BBC noted: "The US government has temporarily eased sanctions to allow India to buy Russian oil currently stranded at sea, amid escalating tensions in the Middle East. …Washington has put particular pressure on India - a major buyer of Russian energy - to stop buying its oil in an effort to reduce money flowing to fund the invasion" (Mollan 2026).

lentless DPRK nuclearization on the bilateral agenda. Instead, the focus was on trade, business deals, tariffs, technology (especially semiconductors), AI, Taiwan, and keeping the Strait of Hormuz open (Drenon 2026).

Presumably, the US knows that China will not back down from supporting Russia because preserving a multipolar world, with Russia as an independent pole, is a core national interest of China. Russia and China are now collaborators in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS. These two multilateral organizations are the only significant international blocs that do not include Western countries. The Russo-Ukrainian War has cemented closer ties not only between Moscow and Beijing but also between Moscow and Pyongyang. Arguably, there is now a strategic bipolarity in Northeast Asia: China-Russia-DPRK (a troika of nuclear powers) against a US–ROK–Japan security alignment underpinned by US extended nuclear deterrence for its Korean and Japanese allies.

Russo-Ukrainian War: Implications for Japan

The ramifications of Russia's invasion of Ukraine are paradoxically both a threat in a "might-makes-right" international system and an opportunity for Japan to become a rearmed, "normal" state in terms of its security and identity. This is because rearming for the purposes of national security against a "might-makes-right" international system is more acceptable to the Japanese public and to Japan's Asian neighbors, except China and the DPRK. In June 2022, then Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio warned: "Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow."[6] Kishida anticipat-

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[6] Then Japanese Prime Minister Kishida Fumio noted in his speech at the 2022 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore: "Russia's aggression against Ukraine occurred. No country or region in the world can shrug this off as 'someone else's problem'. It is a situation that shakes the very foundations of the international order, which every country and individual gathered here today should regard as their own affair. … Can the rules-based international order we have built through hard work, dialogue, and consensus be upheld and the march of peace and prosperity continue? Or will we return to a lawless world where rules are ignored and broken, where unilateral changes to the

ed that Moscow's war against Kyiv would be a harbinger of armed conflict in Asia once the norms of state sovereignty in the 21st century are shattered in Ukraine.

This radical shift from a rules-based international order to a brutal power-based international system is in contradiction to Japan's foreign policy doctrine of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) underpinned by international law, freedom of navigation, and peaceful multilateral cooperation. The prevailing view is: "What matters to Japan is the impact of the invasion on the global norms against territorial conquest and specifically how the violation of these norms could increase the likelihood of Chinese aggression against Taiwan" (Jacobo 2024).

Tokyo has slapped economic sanctions on Russia, including asset freezes on many individuals and groups involved in the Ukraine war, and has banned exports of industrial, technological, and luxury goods to Russia (AFP-Jiji 2025). Not surprisingly, Moscow has labeled Japan an "unfriendly country." Nevertheless, Tokyo procures oil from the Sakhalin-2 project in Russia's Far East following the disruption to energy supplies due to the Iranian closing of the Strait of Hormuz ("Japan to procure Russian-produced oil" 2026). To be sure, Japanese and European payments to secure Russian energy supplies provide the financial wherewithal for Putin to pursue his war against Ukraine and compensate DPRK troops deployed in Russia.

The Russo-Ukrainian War has inflicted at least three losses on Japan. First, Tokyo's hopes that Moscow would return the Northern Islands, lost to Russian forces at the end of World War II, have been dashed because of deteriorating Japan-Russia relations (Niquet 2024). Second, Japan fears that the deepening Russo-DPRK alliance would boost Pyongyang's nuclearization and therefore pose an existential threat to Japan (Smith 2024). Third, Japanese hopes of resolving the abductee issue or *rachi mondai* (kidnapping of Japanese citizens by North Korea) are also

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status quo by force are unchallenged and accepted, and where the strong coerce the weak militarily or economically? … I myself have a strong sense of urgency that 'Ukraine today may be East Asia tomorrow'" (Kishida 2022).

destroyed because Pyongyang does not need a deal with Tokyo for two reasons: Trump wants to talk to DPRK supremo Kim Jong Un, and Putin offers tangible benefits to the DPRK. Simply put, the DPRK does not need Japan for economic aid and diplomatic recognition.

Arguably, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has boosted domestic political forces and public opinion that Japan should become a "normal state" not hamstrung by Article 9 of its post-World War II pacifist Constitution. Article 9 renounces war and the maintenance of war potential to settle international disputes (O'Shea and Maslow 2024). To be sure, the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (the perennial party-in-power at the national level in Japan) and the Cabinet Legislation Bureau have loosely interpreted Article 9 as permitting "exclusive defensive defense" while prohibiting offensive weapons like long-range bombers and long-range ballistic missiles, and restricting defensive military action to the vicinity of Japan. However, in 2014, the Abe administration reinterpreted the Constitution to allow limited "collective self-defense" to permit the Japan Self-Defense Forces (a euphemism for its military) to assist allies, especially the US, if they are under attack and that attack threatens Japanese survival. To the chagrin of China, Prime Minister Takaichi Sanae declared in parliament in November 2025 that Japan may act militarily if a Chinese invasion of Taiwan were to threaten Japanese national survival (Murakami 2025).

The shifting mood in the Japanese political mainstream is that the country must do more in national defense, given China's rise, Chinese assertiveness towards Taiwan and the maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, US demands for burden sharing by its allies, relentless nuclearization by the DPRK, and the shift from a rules-based order to a "might-makes-right" international system following Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Ishizuka and Kolås 2022). Japanese defense spending has risen from its decades-old cap of 1% gross domestic product (GDP) to 2% GDP by 2026. The defense budget may increase further in the years ahead, despite tepid economic growth, rising social security costs, public debt repayment, shrinking population, and rapid aging.

The strategic direction of the second Abe administration (December

2012 to September 2020) and the Takaichi administration (October 2025 –) is clear and consistent: Tokyo is shedding its allergy to playing a larger security role in regional affairs in concert with its US ally to push back against a more assertive China. This trend to become a more "normal" state not hamstrung by Article 9 is evidenced by its Official Security Assistance (OSA) forged in 2023 to provide non-lethal equipment, supplies and infrastructure to the armed forces of "like-minded" countries; adopt preemptive counterstrike capabilities in the face of imminent threat; export weapons including fighter jets and warships since the ban on the sale of weapons abroad was rescinded in April 2026; and the historic deployment of 1,400 combat troops to the April-May 2026 Balikatan exercises that made Japan a top contributor after the US and the Philippines (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2026).

Japan is also engaging in trilateral security cooperation with its US ally and South Korean neighbor, despite their legacy of historical and territorial disputes. In May 2026, the first vice-ministerial "two-plus-two" security talks between Japan and South Korea's foreign and defense ministries was held in Seoul (Jiji 2026). Relying on US extended nuclear deterrence, Tokyo and Seoul will forge a strategic triad with Washington against the Beijing–Moscow–Pyongyang strategic alignment.[7]

Russo-Ukrainian War: Implications for North Korea

Even though Russia and the DPRK no longer share the same socialist system ideologically, they still have a mutually beneficial, transactional

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7 Sweta Sharma wrote: "China, Russia, and North Korea's de facto alliance risks creating a 'new world order' which could lead to Tokyo facing a three-front contingency in the future, a report released by a think tank of Japan's defence ministry said. The China Security Report 2026, released by the National Institute for Defence Studies (NIDS) in Tokyo, argued that the strategic partnership among the three countries is becoming increasingly assertive … It noted that 'although a formal military alliance among the three countries has not been formed, they have already built a de facto coordinated relationship that functions as a strategic bloc in key areas'" (Sharma 2025).

relationship. In exchange for ammunition, troops, and labor battalions from the DPRK, Russia offers payment, energy, fertilizer, food, technology, and diplomatic support at the UNSC against more international sanctions on North Korea's nuclearization. The DPRK today is the only Northeast Asian country to have valuable battlefield experience in AI-driven drone warfare. One estimate is that at least 11,000 North Korean troops were sent to Russia to help recapture parts of Kursk Oblast after Ukraine launched a surprise attack into Kursk Oblast in August 2024. Another estimate is that about 2,300 DPRK troops have died fighting for Russia against Ukraine (Cheon and Adzkia 2026).

North Korea is now in a much stronger position diplomatically, militarily, and economically because it has benefited from the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War, and North Korea presumably has fewer incentives to engage with the US and South Korea.[8] Perhaps North Korea may even try to play Russia against China, as it did during the Cold War, to extract aid from both. The DPRK has gained tangible benefits from both Russia and China, and does not need vague promises of aid from the US in exchange for complete denuclearization (Han 2026).

Moreover, the DPRK does not trust anyone. It wants nuclear weapons for its state security, regime survival, and status as a powerful nuclear state, of which there are only nine in the world. By alluding to the US war on Iran, DPRK supremo Kim Jung Un affirmed that it was the "right" strategy for his regime to acquire nuclear weapons.[9] Mallie Pry-

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8 Sokolin and Kim's article in NK News observed: "North Korea's economy grew almost 4% in 2024, its fastest pace in eight years, thanks in part to stronger economic cooperation with Russia, South Korea's central bank said. … North Korea's economy grew for a second consecutive year following a 3.1% expansion in 2023, with last year's growth marking the highest in eight years since 2016" (Sokolin and Kim 2025).

9 Will Ripley wrote: "North Korea's Kim Jong Un has said the United States' war with Iran proves his country made the right decision to keep its nuclear weapons. In a speech to North Korea's Supreme People's Assembly…, Kim accused Washington of 'acts of state sponsored terrorism and aggression,' but did not mention Iran by name. … 'The present situation clearly proves' that North Korea was justified in rejecting what he described as US pressure and 'sweet talk' to give up its nuclear arsenal, Kim said. He added that North Korea's nuclear status is now 'irreversible'" (Ripley 2026).

therch writes: "The war in Iran, alongside the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, has vindicated North Korea's mantra: nuclear weapons are the only guarantee of sovereignty."[10]

Basking in the limelight on the podium at Beijing's military parade during the latter's 80th Victory over Imperial Japan anniversary may enhance the prestige of Kim Jong Un to DPRK citizens. North Korea has little incentive to talk to South Korea; neither does it need humanitarian nor economic aid from the ROK. Pyongyang, if it wishes, can talk directly to Washington and bypass Seoul as an interlocutor. On 9 May 2026, North Korea signaled closer ties with Russia by sending—for the first time—a contingent of its troops to march in Moscow's Red Square in commemoration of the 81st Soviet victory over Nazi Germany (Woo 2026). The DPRK is now important to both Russia and China in their conceptions of a multipolar world not dominated by the US superpower and its allies.

Russo-Ukrainian War: Implications for ROK

Russia's invasion of Ukraine significantly impacted South Korea in three areas: security, diplomacy, and economy. Seoul has aligned itself with the West to provide non-lethal aid to Ukraine and imposed selective sanctions on Moscow. Not surprisingly, Moscow has labeled the ROK an "unfriendly country." As of May 2026, there are no direct flights between the two countries. Many product categories were subjected to South Korean export restrictions to Russia.[11] Bilateral trade has also plunged since

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[10] Mallie Prytherch wrote: "The war in Iran, alongside the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, has vindicated North Korea's mantra: nuclear weapons are the only guarantee of sovereignty" (Prytherch 2026).

[11] South Korea's export restrictions to Russia are elaborated by Jeena Kim, Sodam Kim and Bocham Kim as follows: "In the area of export controls, South Korea has continued to align its measures with those of the United States (US), particularly regarding Russia and Belarus. One key development was the expansion of the so-called situational-licence list, which covers items that are not generally classified as strategic items but still require export approval from the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy (MOTIE) due to their potential risk of being diverted for use in

2022.[12] Moreover, South Korea's hopes for energy pipelines from Russia to the ROK via the Trans-Korean Gas Pipeline from Vladivostok to industrial zones in South Korea are now dashed.[13] However, the Russo-Ukrainian War has also boosted South Korea as a major arms exporter, with countries such as Poland becoming major purchasers.[14]

However, Seoul has not burned bridges with Moscow because it is mindful that the latter has close ties to Pyongyang. Even though the Lee Jae Myung administration wishes to engage with North Korea, hopes for direct talks, peaceful coexistence, and cooperation (through the reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex), let alone the unification of the Korean Peninsula, have faded. Despite the Russo-Ukrainian War, Russians can still travel to South Korea without a traditional visa for up to 60 days for tourism or transit, so long as they obtain a Korea Electronic Travel Authorization (K-ETA) online before traveling. Anecdotally, a top South Korean university has also accepted many more Russian students because they are less inclined to study in Europe, which is perceived to

weapons of mass destruction. To this end, the MOTIE issued a notification, effective 24 February 2024, adding 682 items to the list, which included heavy construction machinery, secondary batteries, machine tools and aircraft components. A subsequent notification, effective 9 September 2024, added a further 243 items considered to have a high risk of military end use, including metal-cutting machines, machine-tool components, optical-device parts and sensors. With these additions, the total number of items requiring a situational licence for export to Russia and Belarus rose to 1,402" (Kim 2025).

12 A Russian source explains the decrease in South Korean-Russian bilateral trade thus: "With Russia and North Korea now at the strategic partner level, Russia's unofficial trade with the North is now probably higher than its official trade with South Korea. South Korea has taken part in Western sanctions against Russia, with bilateral trade at US$11.9 billion in 2024, dropping steadily for the past three years" ("Russia, South Korea Bilateral Relations" 2025).

13 According to the *Global Energy Monitor*: "The pipeline was proposed to run from Vladivostok, Russia to industrial zones in South Korea. A 2018 joint Russian-Korean feasibility study proposed a 1202-km route from Vladivostok, Russia through North Korea to Wonsan, Cheorwon, Paju, Incheon, and Pyeongtaek, South Korea. The study also proposed a 1505-km route that would add a loop to Pyongyang and Kaesong, North Korea" ("Trans-Korea Gas Pipeline" 2025).

14 An article in *The Straits Times states*: "South Korea's arms sales jumped to more than US$17 billion in 2022 from US$7.25 billion the year before." See "Poland tie-up to help South Korea in bid to become major arms supplier" (*The Straits Times* 2024).

be less welcoming to them.[15] Thus, South Korea has kept the door open for better ties with Russia when its war against Ukraine inevitably winds down.

On the diplomatic front, South Korea has reinforced its alliance with the US, improved relations with Japan, and has been attending NATO summits regularly since 2022 (Ballbach 2025). While there is an emerging security triad between South Korea, the US, and Japan, Seoul has also pursued multilateral middle power diplomacy with ASEAN member states and India to maximize its diplomatic space, agency, resilience of supply chains, and technological cooperation (Park 2026; Kim 2026).

The deepening Russian–North Korean alliance is indeed a conundrum for South Korea. The Russian transfer of drone, ballistic missile, and nuclear submarine technology, real or potential, to the DPRK, is obviously worrisome to Seoul. Yet all wars eventually end, including the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian conflict. In this regard, South Korea should play the long game pragmatically by seeking better relations with the China-Russia-North Korea triad and striving for engagement and peaceful coexistence with North Korea, while maintaining its own deterrence.

It is conceivable that regional politics in East Asia, including the Korean Peninsula, can change swiftly if Trump were to cut a deal with Kim Jong Un during the former's second administration. But for any deal on the Korean Peninsula to be durable, it must be made by more than just the US and the DPRK. It also needs the consent and support of China, Russia, and the ROK. Despite the emerging security bipolarity in Northeast Asia between China, Russia, and North Korea on one side and South Korea, the US, and Japan on the other, Seoul must assiduously strengthen bridges within and between the two triads to avoid a new Cold War or a potential hot war.

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15 Intimation by a dean at a top South Korean university in July 2025.

Russo-Ukrainian War: Implications for ASEAN member states

The shift from a rules-based order to a “might-makes-right” international system is inimical to most of the small and middle powers in Southeast Asia. A world driven by power politics undermines ASEAN centrality and the quest for multilateral cooperation for the 11 ASEAN states, China, Japan, and South Korea. ASEAN would be in an insidious position if China, which had rejected the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling on the disputed waters in 2016, were to adopt a unilateral and coercive approach in the disputed South China Sea. Beijing has adamantly insisted on its ambiguous, self-declared nine-dash line, which covers around 90% of the South China Sea, as its historical right. Although China is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), its position on the nine-dash line is inconsistent with UNCLOS, which rejects historical claims. The behaviors and attitudes of China in the South China Sea, the US against Iran, and Russia towards Ukraine are deeply troubling to many small and middle powers in Southeast Asia.

ASEAN member states are not unified in their response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. At the United Nations General Assembly, most ASEAN member states voted to condemn the invasion while Vietnam and Laos abstained. Myanmar’s military junta supports Moscow (Yee 2022; Yee 2026). Singapore is the only ASEAN member state to impose sanctions on Russia. Malaysia, Vietnam, and Myanmar buy weapons from Russia. Some ASEAN member states, including the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam, are turning to Russian oil due to supply shortages caused by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz (Mahmud 2026).

There is the danger that nuclear proliferation on the Korean Peninsula will undermine the global Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime and the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty, which entered into force in March 1997. The harsh reality is that North Korea’s alliance with Russia has strengthened the former’s hand to the extent that it is unwilling to give up its nuclear weapons. The DPRK is a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Singapore and Hanoi (in Vietnam) hosted the Trump-Kim Summits in 2018 and 2019, respectively. All ASEAN member states, except Malaysia, have official diplomatic relations with the DPRK. The ASEAN states and North Korea are fellow members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)—a forum of 121 countries—from the Global South. Notwithstanding the Russo-Ukrainian War and Pyongyang's alliance with Moscow, ASEAN member states and South Korea should patiently seek dialogue with North Korea for peaceful coexistence. Ideally, some ASEAN member states friendly to North Korea can try to be a bridge between the North and the South on the divided Korean Peninsula if the former does not want to talk directly with the latter today.

Epilogue: Back to the Future?

In a brutal world of power politics where great powers flex their military muscles, small and middle powers should hedge against capricious superpowers by seeking greater cooperation among themselves. To be sure, they must also seek good relations with the superpowers and swallow their pride to survive and thrive. While this is a bitter pill to swallow, the harsh reality is that smaller powers can be caught in the crossfire of great power contestation, and many Lilliputians may not be able to bind the few Gullivers. Bandwagoning with a particular great-power against another is also a dangerous game.

Even though the future is uncertain and fraught with perils, East Asian powers—small, middle and great—can and should pragmatically support mutually beneficial arrangements like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) as well as ASEAN multilateralism platforms such as the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) to keep the lines of communication open to reduce misunderstandings. The three Northeast Asian countries should also strengthen their Trilateral Cooperation Secretariat

(TCS). East Asian countries should not be fatalistic about being destined for conflict in a "might-makes-right" international system. They must exercise their agency and creativity in restoring their relations with Russia (when its war with Ukraine eventually ends) and in encouraging North Korea to cooperate economically and live at peace with its neighbors.

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A Laboratory of Sovereignty:
An Examination of the 1911 International Plague Conference in Mukden, China

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Abstract

The International Plague Conference at Mukden marked the close of the pneumonic plague crisis that devastated Manchuria and alarmed the international community in 1911. Reflecting on efforts to stop the plague's devastation at the International Plague Conference, Viceroy Hsi-Liang highlighted modern medical science, the presence of recognized international medical science experts, and a duty to the welfare of the Chinese people as prevalent elements of the epidemic crisis and its resolution. I argue that the modern laboratory became a central stage at the International Plague Conference, where discussions about the pneumonic plague deployed the laboratory, which transformed big, uncertain scientific problems into microscopic, ordered, and manageable biopolitical solutions. Thus, the International Plague Conference, through its recommendations, constituted modern medical science as a widely recognized institution of sociopolitical sovereignty to "guard the welfare" of the Manchurian people for the Chinese central government and broader regional colonial projects.

Keywords

China, History of Medicine in East Asia, Science and Diplomacy, Modern Science, International Affairs, Global history, Colonial medicine

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Introduction

The International Plague Conference in Mukden in 1911 served as a closing event for the pneumonic plague that devastated Manchuria and frightened the world. The gathering of renowned scientists in Mukden asserted modern science as a vital tool of statecraft, while legitimating China's claim to sovereignty over contested Manchuria against Russian and Japanese imperial rivals. In his opening speech at the Mukden Conference, Viceroy Hsi-Liang (錫良, Xīliáng) praised the mobilization of international medical experts in resolving the plague epidemic crisis. His speech emphasized modern science as the key factor in allowing the Chinese state to fulfill its sovereign duty to protect the welfare of the Chinese people. This Mukden Conference provided the Chinese central government and international participants with an opportunity to explicitly link modern science to sovereignty and statecraft in a public and authoritative space. In doing so, the Qing and early Republican Chinese central governments purposefully positioned themselves within recognized conceptualizations of Western modernity as an equal to rival imperial states. How did China and other states adopt and delineate modern science as a shared tool of governance as a representation of international modernity and sovereignty during the early twentieth century? This article examines the International Plague Conference as a decisive moment in the resolution of the Manchurian plague crisis. I focus on the Mukden Conference as a formative site for the emergence of modern public health governance, colonial medicine, and state sovereignty as a standardized international tool of governance. At the Mukden Conference, Wu Lien-teh (伍連德; Wǔ Liándé) and international delegates such as Kitasato Shibasaburō (北里 柴三郎), Richard Pearson Strong, and Danylo Zabolotny are identified as central figures who translated laboratory science discussion into policy proposals for the Chinese central government. The participating scientists formulated public health recommendations as tools of political policy that concretely defined shared notions of modernity and state sovereignty.

How does defining modernity and sovereignty at the Mukden Conference relate to Manchuria and the end of the epidemic crisis? First, I engage with existing literature, showing that scholarship emphasizes the importance of colonial medicine to the practice of imperial governance at the turn of the twentieth century. Existing literature highlights the Manchurian plague crisis as a significant moment that led to the political development of modern public health institutions and the advancement of laboratory science and international cooperation. While prior studies focus primarily on the epidemic itself and its immediate containment, I show that less attention has been paid to the Mukden Conference as an independent historical event that consolidated international scientific authority and standardized public health governance as a collective tool of state modernity and sovereignty. Second, this article adopts Charles Rosenberg's conception of epidemics as unfolding through a Three-Act narrative structure as an analytical framework to locate the Mukden Conference within the Manchurian plague crisis. The Mukden Conference is interpreted as part of the "resolution" phase of the Manchurian plague narrative. In doing so, the Mukden Conference connected epidemic management to broader transnational political and imperial processes, analyzed how scientific authority was socially constructed, and traced how public health became intertwined with sovereignty and state formation. In applying Rosenberg's analytical framework, I argue that the Mukden Conference provided participating empires a unique opportunity to transform shared comprehensions of laboratory science into accepted standards of modern statecraft within frameworks of international conventions that recognized imperial sovereignty over colonialized territory. Additionally, this article demonstrates that the Mukden Conference strengthened Qing and Republican Chinese claims to sovereignty in contested Manchuria, through institutions such as the Manchurian Plague Prevention Service, while simultaneously legitimizing Japanese and American colonial governance models elsewhere in Asia. This broader institutionalization of laboratory scientific solutions as a form of political policy meant the consolidation of an international understanding of public health as a legitimate tool of statecraft. It also led to the establishment and maintenance of a recognizable standard of state sovereignty amid imperial rivalry over Northeast Asia in this crucial moment of the early twentieth century.

Literature Review

Qing China experienced many dangerous epidemics at the beginning of the twentieth century, notably the 1894 Hong Kong plague, the 1911 Manchurian plague, and the second Manchurian plague outbreak in 1919. The 1911 Manchurian plague stands out as the deadliest and as the outbreak with the most striking political consequences. The Mukden Conference was convened at the end of the Manchurian plague crisis by the Qing central government to consolidate its political position in the region and raise its international status as a modern state. Existing literature on epidemics and modern China emphasizes that this particular event was "dramatic" and pivotal to the institutional process of ushering in the Chinese central government's first public health institutions in the twentieth century, such as the Manchurian plague Prevention Service (Andrews and Bullock 2014, 8). The Manchurian Plague Prevention Service was modeled after Western public health institutions informed by the recommendations of the International Plague Conference. The adoption of these recommendations can be interpreted as a pivotal moment in a political process, driven by Chinese elites, to elevate modern scientific and medical practice and theory over traditional Chinese medicine to gain recognition as a modern state within the Western imperial global community (Gamsa 2006, 179). Sean Hsiang-Lin Lei (2020, 94), Mark Gamsa (2006, 179), Ruth Rogaski (2004, 260), and Eli Chernin (1989, 318) describe the ascendance of modern medical science in China as a vital topic of discussion to understand changing configurations of the modern Chinese state at the beginning of the twentieth century. Historian William Summers (2012, 89) shows that the Manchurian plague and the resulting Mukden Conference brought together important international advocates and experts of modern laboratory science to the Chinese public's attention, which raised questions concerning the role of science within state sovereignty practices in contested Manchuria.

Modern science advocates translated ideas about laboratory science and epidemic prevention into the language of biopolitical governance. Conference policy recommendations laid the groundwork for an international body of public health measures and policies that informed later League of Nations and eventual United Nations public health missions. In the context of these later international institutional developments, we can view Lei's (2020, 74) assertion that the Manchurian plague crisis was a "watershed event in the history of modern medicine [in China]" to have regional and international implications on the perception of modern medicine as a means of international administration and statecraft. As a "watershed moment," the International Plague Conference took place at a crucial time for the Qing Chinese government to adopt modern public health as part of its institutional administration and promote itself as a modern state, while contributing to the formation of globalized public health institutions (Gamsa 2006, 172; Hammond 2020, 41).

A medicalized view of Chinese society framed health problems as political, organizing governance solutions around the public health administration of the Chinese central government and the biological body of its population. Historian Ruth Rogaski (2004, 6) identifies the Manchurian plague crisis as a significant event that shaped China's national experience with Western modernity, particularly in the way that modern laboratory scientific procedures was incorporated into state governance infrastructure. However, when exploring the process of modern laboratory science being adopted as part of state governance in the context of the Manchurian plague, discussions concerning its role in shaping the broader administration of state sovereignty at the closing Mukden Conference remain marginal. Historian Se-Kwon Jeong (2020, 359) expertly unpacks the laboratory debates and scientific disagreements that unfolded within Conference sessions, highlighting the uncertainty and heated negotiation that produced the final recommendations, but not expanding on the broader biopolitical implications of the recommendations. Rogaski (2004, 153) demonstrates that the biopolitical rationale and understanding of the modern state in the early twentieth century, as perceived by the Qing central government, in the form of a hygienic modernity, was explained as a political adaptation of the Meiji Japanese empire's reinterpretation of modern laboratory science into public health administration. For the Meiji government, the state could exercise political and social responsibility over a colonial population by maintaining individual health through national institutions: intervening in epidemics, urban planning to maintain cleanliness, meeting basic needs, and educating people in personal hygiene habits. For the Qing and Meiji governments, incorporating modern laboratory science added the weight of Western colonial authority to political actions that could be framed as public health solutions that worked against "nation-state body" threats from imperial rivals. Here Birdie Andrews and Mary Bullock (2014, 9) are insightful, showing that epidemic prevention was configured as a social responsibility through articulations of public health and hygiene. The move to link epidemic prevention and public health protection was decisive in connecting the ideas of the Chinese central government and social elites about individual health to national strength. To the Chinese central government, modern science was presented as an institutional tool of internationally accepted governance to manage societal threats, including contagious diseases and urban poverty, while meeting ideological goals. The Mukden Conference can be understood as a key event for the Chinese central government's encounter with state-led modern medical science as an institutional apparatus that realized an ideal form of Chinese state sovereignty in the early twentieth century. At the end of the Mukden Conference, the Chinese government acted on delegate recommendations and established the internationally recognized Manchurian Plague Prevention Service. The service was established as a public health institution to protect the Manchurian frontier from epidemic disease, while acting as an internationally acknowledged arm of the Chinese state capable of defending Chinese sovereignty against Japanese and Russian threats.

It should be also noted that the Chinese central government elevated Dr. Wu Lien-teh to the status of a hero who helped overcome the epidemic crisis and gain international prestige over regional rivals. The promotion of a heroic figure provided the Chinese government with an opportunity to define its proximity to notions of modernity. Significantly, the timing of the Mukden Conference allowed Chinese narratives of heroism to concretely articulate standards of modernization and state sovereignty in a visible and international way, particularly at a time when political anxiety in Chinese Manchuria and the broader region had spiked. In *Sovereignty and the Microscope*, historian Sean Hsiang-Lin Lei (2020, 76, 87) gives critical attention to Chinese people's resistance to anti-plague measures, which opens a conversation about how non-state actors, such as practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine, responded to modern public health measures and institutions implemented by the Chinese central government. This tension highlights the narrative of the Manchurian plague being made up of diverse local and international interests, and recognizing the actors involved in portraying these interests underscores the significance of the Mukden Conference in shaping the narrative. The Conference served as a site that promoted the Chinese government's relationship to modernity at the expense of conflicting narratives and interests, particularly with Wu Lien-teh's emergence as a hero and champion of laboratory science during the epidemic crisis.

The conclusion of the Manchurian plague crisis with the Mukden Conference can be perceived as an end to a dramatic moment that combined medical and political consequences on a scale not previously experienced by the Chinese central government. During the plague crisis, Wu Lien-teh emerged as the central Chinese figure mediating the adoption of laboratory practice through political governance (Lei 2020, 76–77). Wu's heroic narrative was strategically positioned as an agent and constructed object that drove the Manchurian plague crisis story in a way that linked the identification of problems and the resolution of the crisis to Wu's professional aspirations, the Chinese government's goals, and the expectations of Western science. My article locates Wu Lien-teh's construction as a hero as an opportunity for the Chinese central government to define and relate to Western imperial expectations of state modernity and sovereignty. Here, Wu served as a point of intersection among the Chinese central state, international scientists, and his own personal aspirations.

When situating Wu Lien-teh's heroic role is viewed as a constructed narrative, the Mukden Conference provides critical optics on the establishment of accepted forms of shared state modernity and sovereignty. Within scholarly discussions, the epidemic's drama focused primarily on the carnage of the epidemic as a medical and political crisis, inevitably shifting attention away from the impact of the Mukden Conference. In other words, the narrative of the Manchurian plague was made up of diverse interests and recognizing this diversity is crucial to understanding the Conference's role in defining and characterizing modernity and sovereignty in a concrete way in the early twentieth century.

Historian Charles Rosenberg's (2020, 3–7) understanding of an epidemic as drama frames it as human and non-human relational process, providing analytical attention to different narrative elements without detracting from the importance of the whole event. In other words, Rosenberg's framing provides a vantage point to move the focus of narrative and analysis towards the Mukden Conference without treating the gravity of the epidemic crisis itself as a backdrop. Within this narrative-as-argument approach, Rosenberg's Three-Act framework helps locate structures, actors, and events , bringing attention to visible and unseen convergent and divergent activities that construct and constitute specific historical storylines. The production of knowledge (and those involved in its making and dissemination) at the Conference can be situated more explicitly within historical relations informed by networks and systems of colonial state medicine in the early twentieth century. Here, the *International Plague Conference Report* connects the material and metaphorical role of the modern scientific laboratory during the crisis to the broader conference activities and to the colonial powers taking part in the discussions. The laboratory played a leading role in resolving the plague crisis and emerged as a central site of exposition, authority, discussion, and recommendation within the Mukden Conference. During contested discussions, the laboratory made medical, social, and political problems that were big, uncertain, and abstract appear under the microscope, in test tubes, rendering them, ordered, manageable, and concrete to expert and public audiences. Microscopic problems and solutions were then expanded through conference panel discussions, field visits, and collectively agreed recommendations, which were implemented in Manchurian society to intervene against present and future biopolitical fears and anxieties.

During the Conference sessions, delegates identified a problem prompted by the epidemic, presented and debated laboratory results or performed laboratory experiments, discussed the meaning and implications of the results, and formulated recommendations for the Chinese government (International Plague Conference 1912, 140–53). The medical science recommendations were the political solutions at the Mukden Conference, and they were then translated into public health policy which encompassed the Manchuria region over the course of three weeks. The establishment of modern public health infrastructure, including hospitals, railway transport networks, and urban planning projects in city center, materially extended Western-style modern state institutions through the Manchurian region. This expansion of modern scientific practice and technology from laboratory discussions to infrastructure and policy beyond the Mukden Conference halls synergized with broader imperial projects in places such as colonial Taiwan, the Philippines, and Korea (Low 2005, 109; Rogaski 2020, 134). In this regard, Conference delegates and imperial agents produced new knowledge that standardized and legitimated modern public health institutions as a recognizable measure of state sovereignty, and as a justifiable mechanism of colonial administration in their occupied territories. Thus, the Mukden Conference constituted modern laboratory scientific solutions as a widely recognized biopolitical institution of modernity and political sovereignty to "guard the welfare" of the Manchurian people for the Qing and subsequent Republican Chinese governments, and for broader colonial projects in East and Southeast Asia.

The Manchurian plague "drama" through Rosenberg's analytical narrative can then be conceived as a collective action of characters and organizations, casting the heroic scientists against a villainous epidemic. This was a narrative that brought the East Asian experience together with modern science, politics, and modern state sovereignty at regional and international levels (International Plague Conference 1912, xi; Wu 2014, 1–5). For the Chinese central government and its elites, the conclusion of the Mukden Conference established modern laboratory scientific practice as a visible and viable tool of state governance to secure and strengthen their political sovereignty in the present and future, particularly in the face of regional and international threats to the Qing Chinese imperial state. Wu Lien-teh's heroic narrative was then reconstructed as one embodying Chinese elite aspirations for modern political ideals of national state security and Western imperial acknowledgment, while providing him with the agency to take advantage of the event for his own professional goals. Wu Lien-teh's success gained him the trust of Manchurian politicians and Chinese elites, such as Viceroy Hsi-Liang, and elevated his status within the broader international scientific community represented at the Conference. These included scientific delegates like Dr. Kitasato Shibasaburō, Dr. Richard Strong, and Dr. Danylo Zabolotny, who held similar beliefs about modern science and its role in colonial society. Thus Rosenberg's dramatic narrative approach helps integrate the Conference, the modern laboratory, and the collective presences of Wu Lien-teh, Kitasato Shibasaburō, Richard Strong, and Danylo Zabolotny into a critical event for the adoption and standardization of modern science as a tool of state governance for both the Chinese state and colonial powers in the region.

In summary, the International Plague Conference demonstrated how the Qing government deployed science as a strategic diplomatic tool to manage regional political tensions and defend its sovereignty in Manchuria. Carl Nathan (1967, 1, 23), Mark Gamsa (2006, 168), Se-Kwon Jeong (2020, 358), and Ruth Rogaski (2004, 147) argue that the Conference mediated both politics and science. The Qing government used the successful resolution of the plague to negotiate tensions surrounding Japanese expansion into Korea and Russian imperial interests in Mongolia, particularly amid military mobilizations during the epidemic. Robert Peckham (2015, 209–10) and Se-Kwon Jeong (2020, 357–59) show that the Qing invited international medical experts to manage rival powers and improve public relations during the crisis. By redefining participants as "scientific delegates" rather than military or political representatives, the Qing government strategically used science to defuse political antagonism and elevate modern scientific practice as a legitimate instrument of modern statecraft and sovereignty (Peckham 2015, 219).

However, scholarship on the International Plague Conference has not fully explored its role in consolidating laboratory science into a shared tool of governance that informed modernity and sovereignty in East Asia at the particularly pivotal moment. The Mukden Conference occurred immediately after Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910 and just before the 1911 Revolution, placing the Manchurian plague crisis at a major geopolitical turning point in the region. While Roger Des Forges (1973, 170–71) and Robert Peckham (2015, 212) identify Manchuria as a frontier where the Conference mediated competing colonial interests, the Conference's role in shaping and consolidating colonial projects remains understudied. This article addresses this lacuna by arguing that the Mukden Conference provided an opportunistic and seemingly impartial space for imperial actors to articulate and negotiate competing colonial agendas within Manchuria and the broader East Asian region. Ultimately, the International Plague Conference consolidated laboratory science as a transnational language of authority through which public health management became intertwined with political governance and social control. By transforming regional colonial medical practices into internationally standardized public health institutions, the Mukden Conference reinforced Qing and Republican Chinese claims to sovereignty through institutions such as the Manchurian Plague Prevention Service, while also legitimizing Japanese and American colonial models of governance in East and Southeast Asia.

The Manchurian Plague: A Drama in Three-Acts

The Manchurian plague has been described as one of the most "dramatic" and devastating disease outbreaks of the twentieth century. It has been estimated to have killed between 45,000 and 60,000 people in the winter of 1910–1911 (Yu 2014, 92; Summers 2012, 159). Xinzhong Yu (2014, 92) argues that it was a "key formative" event that threatened the lives and social order of Chinese society, which Summers asserted was a global threat. As a drama, the Manchurian plague corresponds to Rosenberg's analysis of epidemic incidents. In his analysis of diverse epidemics like plague, cholera, typhus, and AIDS, Rosenberg (2020, 3–7) identifies a commonality. The progression of epidemics conforms to archetypical patterns that formulate narratively into a structured Three-Act play.

Rosenberg's concept of Three-Act play serves as a narrative framework to identify and analyze different aspects of an epidemic. This structure provides a way to look at events within an epidemic in a different light, applicable to the International Plague Conference at the end of the 1911 Manchurian plague. For Rosenberg, Act-one follows the progressive revelation through the initial appearance and gradual recognition of the disease. Act-two traces the acknowledgment of the existence of the epidemic, managing the unpredictability, and forming a collective explanatory framework for the mode of transmission and the promise of control. Finally, Act-three encompasses a defining characteristic of an epidemic, the decisive and visible community response, resolution, and "moral structure that can be imposed as an epilogue" (Rosenberg 2020, 3–9). Importantly, Rosenberg (2020, 8) identifies the "adoption and administration of public health measures in this final-Act as an inevitable "reflect[ion of] cultural attitudes." Through this dramaturgic framework, this article narrates the progression of the Manchurian plague in a way that locates the International Plague Conference as a site of regional and international biopolitical sovereignty.

Act-1: Progressive Revelation

In October 1910, a mysterious plague appeared in the Russian-controlled frontier town of Manchouli. By November, infected people overwhelmed the Manchouli health services and the local government was forced to turn railway cabins into isolation units and impose quarantine zones in the town. However, despite these public health efforts, Russian authorities could contain neither the spread of the disease, nor the movement of people, nor the fear that gripped the town. This state of anxiety was most apparent during the impending Chinese New Year. The local authorities could not stop panicked Chinese migrant laborers from returning home on trains to escape the uneasiness. As fear spread and people fled, infection traveled across the Manchurian train network, reaching as far as Chinese cities such as Beijing. This unknown disease escalated into an epidemic crisis and global threat by the end of November 1910 (Summers 2012, 15).

Act-2: Acknowledgment, Management, and Promise of Control

In December 1910, Dr. Wu Lien-teh entered the scene when the epidemic had exploded into crisis across Manchuria. Wu's professional background and political connections constructed him into a key protagonist. He was trained in Europe from 1896 to 1904, studying medicine at Cambridge University, and then worked at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and the Pasteur Institute. Afterward, Wu moved to Malaysia and worked with British colonial authorities from 1904 to 1907. He then took up the opportunity to work as vice director of the Army Medical College in Tianjin, China, from 1907 to 1910 (Lei 2020, 78; Soon 2020, 20–22). As the political and health crisis spread, Chinese epidemic prevention efforts came under the direct authority of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alfred Sze [施肇基 Shī Zhàojī], called Wu, who was his friend. Dr. Wu was first dispatched to Mukden and then immediately to Harbin, the perceived epicenter of the crisis, arriving there on 24 December 1910 (Yu 2014, 104).

In Harbin, Wu Lien-teh and his Western-trained medical science team cooperated with Russian authorities and proceeded to conduct modern scientific examinations of the disease. Wu and his team discovered that the disease was airborne; this pneumonic attribute made the disease infectiously and virulently more dangerous than the suspected bubonic plague (Gamsa 2006, 159). Under the pressure of international opinion and a strong need to protect its national sovereignty against its regional rivals, the Chinese imperial government acted swiftly to publish Wu's laboratory findings and leverage the authority of medical science to support his prevention recommendations, such as controversial policies of cremating the dead and imposing forced quarantine (Yu 2014, 104; Nathan 1967, 74; Summers 2012, 19). The specific use of cremation and quarantine could be perceived as a distinct moment when modern medical science was introduced into Manchuria by the Chinese imperial state. The Qing government deployed scientific authority to intervene in the private lives of its Manchurian citizens to protect national health. However, many Manchurians resisted this imposed public health solution like quarantine and cremation, as it interfered with traditional mourning rituals (Rogaski 2020, 2, 6). Robert Peckham (2016, 212) and Wayne Soon (2020, 20–22) argue that the Chinese government's rapid implementation of Wu's modern public health policy was closely related to its effectiveness as a political tool to keep Japanese and Russian rivals in check. By the beginning of 1911, Chinese, Russian, and Japanese authorities all imposed Western colonial-styled quarantines, sanitary cordons, and population controls to stop the plague. These rival imperial powers contended that their strict measures suppressed the epidemic. The crisis was finally managed, controlled, and ended by March 1911 (Lei 2020, 12).

Act-3: International Plague Conference, Community Response, and Resolution

On 1 March 1911, the Manchurian plague crisis reached zero deaths. Soon after, in Harbin, Dr. Wu Lien-teh received an unexpected telegram from Alfred Sze, Councillor at the Chinese Foreign Office, who wrote:

> "Central Government has decided to hold International Plague Conference at Mukden early in April. Prepare to leave for Mukden as soon as possible" (Wu 2014, 39).

Chinese central government elites envisioned the successful suppression of the calamitous epidemic as a political opportunity and acted to assert China's leading role in resolving the crisis. To these Qing and reformist government elites, modern medical science formed a crucial component of the "self-strengthening" government apparatus that served to restore China's sovereign strength and "secure its future" against rival powers (Spence 1990, 216). The International Plague Conference can thus be perceived as a key site for this political design. To this end, Dr. Wu Lien-teh's heroic performance with modern science placed him in a position where he was entrusted to organize the entire conference. In other words, Dr. Wu was brought to the forefront of their goals to materialize a desired "self-strengthening" mission that aimed to combine modern science and state administration (Wu 2014, 39). To stress the meeting's privileged status, Wu was instructed to "consult the Viceroy and local commissioner of Foreign Affairs" and "spare no expense" in preparing for the arrival of twelve participating nations with "leading specialists expected from Russia, America, Japan, and Germany" with special reference to the famed Japanese bacteriologist, Professor Kitasato Shibasaburō (Wu 2014, 39–40). In this final-act of the Manchurian plague drama, Chinese government elites had chosen their lead actor, made modern science their stage, prepared for their invited cast, and expected an attentive international audience.

Wu Lien-teh packed up his symbolic microscope, bade farewell to colleagues and boarded a train, hastening across the 300-mile railway journey to Mukden. On arrival, he learned that the Conference was a scientific meeting that would start on 3 April 1911 and last for at least 21 days; accommodating and entertaining Eastern and Western delegates with the greatest hospitality (Wu 2014, 41). Hearing these details, Wu remarked that "China was indeed receiving her initial trial as a modern conference centre!" (Wu 2014, 42). This excitement was not surprising, as previous international medical science conferences had been hosted in Western Europe. Rogaski (2004, 1, 20) explains that at this time, Chinese social elites understood modernity as a form of state power, which encompassed reinterpreted notions of scientific standards of progress, bodily and environmental health and cleanliness, and racial fitness as recognized by Western imperial powers. For Wu, the Mukden Conference was a key part of accomplishing the goal of elevating China into a country recognized for modern science by acting as a means to gain recognition from the international medical scientific community.

In Mukden, Wu Lien-teh met Viceroy Hsi-Liang of the Three Eastern Chinese Provinces of Manchuria: Fengtian, Kirin, and Heilungkiang. Viceroy Hsi-Liang was considered one of the most powerful Chinese provincial officials at the time, and he was primarily concerned with a variety of state duties aimed at preserving Chinese state sovereignty and prosperity (Des Forges 1973, xvii, 169). These responsibilities included resisting foreign military invasion of Qing territory in Manchuria, promoting the economic expansion of the province, and protecting the health and welfare of the Chinese peasantry. At the Mukden Conference, Viceroy Hsi-Liang graciously received (China) Wu Lien-teh and supported Conference preparations, even insisting that he be personally updated with preparation progress and any discussions that took place between Wu and Alfred Sze. In late March, Alfred Sze arrived as the appointed Chinese imperial commissioner to oversee the non-scientific side of the Conference, helping Wu finish preparations for the three-week event (Wu 2014, 43). In great anticipation, the Conference officially opened on 3 April and ran until 28 April 1911. The packed schedule began with invited delegates arriving before the commencement and opening speeches, followed by twenty–two discussion sessions on weekdays from 10:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., and concluded with closing speeches. Among the twenty-two sessions, five covered bacteriology and pathology, five concerned epidemiology, two examined clinical data, four discussing epidemic control measures, two about commercial trade effect, and the final four discussed agreed resolutions. Wu Lien-teh was appointed Conference President, which positioned him as a central figure in the proceedings, a notable appointment considering the prestige and renown of many of the participating scientific and political delegates (International Plague Conference 1912, 13–17).

Forty-five delegates and their entourages from thirteen nations entered the scene (International Plague Conference 1912, vii–ix). They were: (USA) Dr. Richard Strong and Dr. Oscar Teague; (Austria–Hungary) Dr. Eugen Worell; (France) Dr. C. Broquet; (Germany) Dr. Erich Martini; (Great Britain) Dr. Reginald Farrar, Dr. G. Petrie, and Dr. Douglas Gray; (Italy) Dr. Gino Galeotti, Dr. Di Guira, and Dr. Ernesto Signorelli; (Japan) Dr. S. Kitasato, Dr. Akira Fujinami, Dr. G. Shibayama, Dr. M. Uyama, and Dr. K. Shimose; (Mexico) Dr. O. Gonzalez–Fabela; (Netherlands) Dr. F. Hehewerth; (Russia) Professor D. Zabolotny, Dr. S. Zlatogoroff, Dr. G. Koulecha, Dr. L. Padelvsky, Dr. Marie Ssouragewskaja, and Dr. Anna Tchourilina; and (China) Dr. Wu Lien–teh, Dr. Ch'uan Shao–Ching, Dr. Fang Chin, Dr. Y. Wang, Dr. R. Hill, Dr. Graham Aspland, Dr. Dugald Christie, Dr. Arthur Stanley, and Dr. Paul Haffkine (International Plague Conference 1912, vii–viii). Yet, among this impressive assembly of expert delegates, Dr. Wu Lien–teh paid particular attention to and expressed special respect for Professor D. Zabolotny of Russia, Dr. Richard Strong and Dr. Oscar Teague of the United States, and Professor S. Kitasato of Japan in his autobiography (Wu 1995, 45–46; Wu 2014, 45–46).

Professor Zabolotny was the Russian authority on plague and had an authoritative international reputation. He was a professor of bacteriology from St. Petersburg Women's Medical Institute, an advocate of laboratory studies in the Caucasus in southern Russia, and a pioneer of modern epidemiology (Summers 2012, 9, 174). According to Dr. Strong, Zabolotny was respected as a "pure scientist, a man who has apparently no political aspirations" (Summers 2012, 88). Dr. Strong was the Director of the Bureau of Science in Manila and, by this point, had been working in the U.S. colonial Philippines for a decade. He was an advocate of microbiology, specifically the power of laboratory science and sanitary science to control tropical disease, manage populations, and civilize colonial subjects (Anderson 2006, 2). In the Philippines, the Americans conceived their colony as a laboratory of both hygiene and modernity. This imagination was useful for American colonial bureaucrats as the laboratory signified a technology of scale that transformed macro phenomena into micro and magnified them again. Microbiology and the microscope provided both knowledge and surveillance that converted the colonial soldier into a sanitary inspector who worked to civilize and modernize the Philippines (Anderson 2006, 4–6).

Within this professional and colonial vein, Professor Kitasato Shibasaburo was a protégé of the eminent scientist Robert Koch, and the head of the Institute of Infectious Diseases in Tokyo (Summers 2012, 23). Kitasato had been invited to tour the South Manchuria Railway Company (SMRC) and became caught up in the epidemic crisis. The SMRC was the company established by one of Kitasato's own protégé's, Gotō Shinpei (後藤 新平). Who had served the governor-general of the Japanese Taiwan colony. As a Western-trained doctor, he believed in modern scientific progress and conceived the governance of Taiwan through biological principles of colonization (Summers 2012, 135). In other words, Japan envisioned Taiwan as a laboratory that was to be expanded into Northeast Asia, where Manchuria was a key target. Significantly, Gotō believed that the SMRC could advance Japanese colonial state policy of "commercial development and modernization" (Summers 2012, 137). Taken together, Kitasato represented the Japanese beginning of a successful model of scientific and social Asian modernity that Chinese imperial and reformist elites aspired towards. As such, Kitasato commanded the respect of his Eastern and Western colleagues, unanimously elected as president of the prestigious bacteriology and pathology panel discussion sections at the opening of the Conference (Wu 2014, 55). Kitasato, Strong, and Zabolotny represented the international delegates' common belief that Western laboratory science and colonial medical practice and theory were crucial to protecting and advancing modern global society.

The speeches at the Mukden Conference opening ceremony reiterated common beliefs among delegates that modern science was a necessity to protect global society. The speakers, Hsi-Liang, Alfred Sze, Zabolotny, and Wu, set the goals for how the newly created and agreed-upon scientific knowledge at the Conference was to be utilized, thereby connecting decisions and ideas concerning Manchuria and modern medicine to the rest of the international community (Wu 2014, 55). Zabolotny asserted that the pneumonic plague was a "problem of Mankind," while Viceroy Hsi-Liang affirmed all delegates' mission of serving the "cause of humanity" (International Plague Conference 1912, xi, 55). Modern medical science, in this regard, was defined by Wu, Hsi-Liang, and Zabolotny as a progressive practice that incorporated bacteriology, sanitation science, and technologies such as railways, telegraphs, and electric lights that were beneficial to the "material welfare of the country" (International Plague Conference 1912, 4–9; Wu 2014, 54). To achieve material welfare, speakers stressed the value of "prevention" and the necessity of modern science to intervene in the home and in private life. Building on these points concerning civil society, Alfred Sze emphasized the connection between railway lines, quarantines, and hospitals, which linked notions of modern science and prevention concerning the built environment to national material welfare (International Plague Conference 1912, 4–6). Notably, all the opening-ceremony speakers incorporated laboratory science into discussions on how to identify problems and formulate solutions in Manchuria. Soon after the opening ceremony, the delegates met and agreed upon 16 rules and procedures for the Conference. These protocols stipulated that the work of the Conference would be presented in two parts: first, a presentation of evidence collected from the Manchurian plague; second, discussions to frame recommendations asked for by the Chinese government based on the analyzed evidence. To do so, the delegates followed the agenda laid out in the official program compiled in English, French, German, and Chinese as the official conference languages (International Plague Conference 1912, 12–13).

On 5 April 1911, the International Plague Conference sessions commenced in earnest. Se-Kwon Jeong (2020, 364) explains that sessions were contested spaces where participants heatedly debated and compared results using different and often competing laboratory methods to evaluate the bacteriological and pathogenic problems posed by the disease. These sessions covered epidemiology, bacteriology and pathology, and prevention measures alongside the history of medical, laboratory, and bacteriological work and delegates' experiences during the pneumonic plague crisis. They focused on the factors driving the crisis, such as the role of rat fleas, the mass migration of laborers for Chinese New Year celebrations, and the unsanitary, overcrowded conditions that accelerated the spread. Additionally, the sessions produced a definitive confirmation of the plague's pneumonic nature, evaluated ongoing preventative measures, and reviewed reports on the microscopic experiments conducted by delegate scientists, including Dr. Strong and Dr. Teague, who had set up a laboratory in the Mukden Conference building (Chernin 1989, 309). This laboratory setup was important as it showed how the Americans transformed the Conference space into a modern laboratory. This transformation was the most striking in sessions 9, 12, and 18. In these sessions, delegates inspected and debated the human autopsies and animal necropsies prepared and presented by Japanese delegates and then examined live tarbagan rats procured from Manchouli, effectively representing the Mukden conference as a literal and metaphorical laboratory (International Plague Conference 1912, 143, 234). Likewise, other sessions and laboratory presentations transformed the Conference into a modern laboratory site that reinterpreted medical-scientific ideas of health and disease into modern state institutional frameworks that could be adopted by the Qing central government (Rogaski 2004, 1–2; Yu 2014, 95).

Discussion sessions represented only one part of the Mukden Conference; another part that expanded colonial medicine and laboratory theory and practice beyond the Conference walls were organized fieldtrips around Manchuria (Jeong 2020, 372). Throughout the three-week Conference, delegates spent two weekends traveling on railways around Manchuria: the first journey to Japanese-controlled Dairen and the second to Russian-governed Harbin. In both cities, Japanese and Russian hosts welcomed the delegates with banquets and city tours. Each visit acted as a way for these rival powers to compete for prestige. At Dairen, Dr. Wu Lien-teh met Japanese doctors and military representatives who praised the city's security and its distinct advantage as the only ice-free port in Manchuria (Wu 2014, 62–63). As the only year-round ice-free port in Manchuria, Dairen provided strategic military and economic access to the Pacific and was an economic, military, and political focal point for international imperial powers during the early twentieth century. Some even said that to Dairen's economic opportunities and military advantages, Manchuria had been aggressively competed over by China, Japan, and Russia (Peckham 2016, 212). Significantly, this trip to Japanese-controlled Dairen for science and leisure represents a simultaneous material and metaphorical interpolation of Conference science into the political character of the region. In Harbin, delegates visited plague hospitals and Russian and Chinese laboratories, and they observed a lack of modernization in the city that exacerbated the plague crisis (Wu 2014, 68–69). If the laboratory was fashioned at the Conference center by delegates in Mukden, it then extended to encompass Manchuria during these weekend tours. As such, the microbiology analyzed by the microscope during the Mukden Conference sessions became magnified sociopolitically through official delegate presence in Harbin and Dairen.

Over the course of the final five sessions of the Conference, delegates were "unable to present methods or evidence that could decisively refute the other party's claims or conclusively prove its own position, and therefore no final conclusion regarding the nature of the pneumonic plague was reached" (Jeong 2020, 361). However, despite the inconclusiveness of the laboratory discussions and presentations, delegates came to an agreement on the public health recommendations for the interim report, which expanded the microscopic discussions within conference sessions into a macro document that embodied shared recommendations for the Chinese government. The document synthesized modern laboratory science into a public health policy guideline. Notably, the interim report provided the Qing government with both administrative policy and public health recommendations that could be implemented immediately, despite the conclusion that "There is no definite evidence to show that the first cases of this epidemic were caused by infection from sick tarbagans" (International Plague Conference 1912, 346). Key priorities included a commitment to improving sanitary conditions, chiefly overcrowding and hygiene, in Manchurian and other affected cities and villages. Second, further investigation was needed by Chinese and Russian authorities to ascertain an association between tarbagan rats and the pneumonic plague (International Plague Conference 1912, 389–90). Delegates agreed that this involved institutional action, which included increased monitoring of migrant populations, such as coolies; improved public education programs; and better preparation of preventive measures, such as sanitary cordons, quarantining of communities, and control of social and work-spaces in times of crisis (International Plague Conference 1912, 390–93). To achieve these goals, the interim report outlined four main action plans: the permanent establishment and training of medical and sanitary staff in provincial capitals; railway companies to devise a uniform sanitary defense; the implementation of a uniform port sanitation administration and quarantine system between imperial China and concerned nations; and continued collection of evidence to develop vaccines against future plague threats (International Plague Conference 1912, 394–96). Accordingly, the interim report's recommendations standardized the medical-scientific and preventive practices that the Chinese central government could incorporate into its administrative policy to legitimize its governance in the region. These resolutions mirrored and affirmed medical science prevention practices already implemented in the Philippines under U.S. colonial rule and Japanese Taiwan during the first decade of their colonizations. Here, the recommended policy systematized laboratory medical science into an internationally acknowledged tool of public health and a signal of modern state sovereignty and administration across regions. In other words, the Qing central government could justify sovereignty over disputed territory by following the recommendations of the Conference report.

The U.S. and Japanese employed medical science experts in their colonial administrations to promote public health governance. These public health experts used bacterial laboratories to diagnose threats of disease infection, and provided solutions aimed to improve the sanitary conditions of vulnerable colonial urban communities (Anderson 2006, 61; Lei 2020, 95). In these colonies, a bacterial examination was already implemented as a system to monitor and supervise poor, non-Anglo, and immigrant communities and neighborhoods, and was to be enforced by colonial sanitation inspectors and government institutions (Lei 2020, 95–96; Ngalamulume 2012, 98; Jeong 2020, 369). This policing of colonial society was particularly evident in the quarantine, surveillance, and inspection services in Taiwanese and Philippine ports (Anderson 2006, 59; Lei 2020, 59). Similarly, Japan's initial colonial policy in Korea coincided with the unfolding of the Manchurian plague crisis. During this period of crisis, which lasted until the end of January 1911, the Japanese colonial government followed the same procedure of imposing bacterial laboratory testing and population quarantine on suspected visitors and migrant laborers from Manchuria at the ports of Incheon and Sinuiju. The colonial sanitary police at the ports monitored and inspected Korean communities to improve sanitary conditions campaigning for the removal of suspected infectious rats (Sihn 2009, 175–79). These colonial laboratory science and institutional efforts contextualize the historical importance of the International Plague Conference Report resolutions that legitimized and standardized institutional medical-scientific practices and policies across diverse colonial projects in East and Southeast Asia. These colonial public health practices constituted a recognized and accepted expression of imperial sovereignty to protect health and hygiene of colonized communities in the region. The interim report formulated scientific diagnoses within the Conference laboratory into recognized tools of sociopolitical intervention within imperial China and "concerned nations," implying that those who met at the Conference had broader intentions. Here, the diverse laboratories in the region had been re-constructed at the Conference, then projected as a standardized model beyond Manchuria.

On 28 April 1911 at 4:00 p.m., the Mukden Conference's closing ceremony presented its final deliberations with acclaim. Viceroy Hsi-Liang applauded the efforts of the delegates to "preserve life and health of the people" (International Plague Conference 1912, 399). This biopolitical conceptualization of Manchuria was expanded by Alfred Sze who declared that the newfound Conference knowledge would not only benefit China but also the world. This view was echoed by the foreign delegate from the Netherlands, Dr. Hehewerth, who proclaimed that the "most eminent scientists" in the world had combatted an "awakened" threat that "China and mankind should fear at any moment" (International Plague Conference 1912, 399–401). These closing speeches can be interpreted as a modern-scientific and public-health call to arms to rally China and the participating empires to prepare for threats and to protect health and life against imminent, invisible scientific and social dangers. This mixing of modern science and diplomatic politics appeared most evidently after the ceremony. Delegates travelled from Mukden to Peking for a grand banquet hosted by the Chinese central government—an occasion Wu Lien-teh described as a mingling of Eastern and Western elites as social peers, where medical professionals took central stage as equals to their political counterparts (Wu 2014, 73–74).

The Epilogue, Manchurian Plague Prevention Service, and Beyond

At the end of the Mukden Conference, Dr. Strong emerged as a leading international figure in medical science research, even being awarded the prestigious Medal of Merit by U.S. President William Howard Taft for his contributions. He first returned to Manila and printed official copies of the Conference proceedings as a report to the U.S. colonial Bureau of Science offices in the Philippines. These hard copies were redistributed back to conference organizers and participants (Chernin 1989, 311). Soon after in 1913, Strong experienced health issues and moved back to the U.S. to take up a position as a professor at Harvard Medical School until 1938. By returning to the U.S., Strong joined the professional rotation of U.S. medical science administrators between the colony and the mainland (Chernin 1989, 316–17; Ngalamulume 2012, 230–31). It should be noted that these traveling U.S. medical science administrators adapted their experiences, gained from colonies like the Philippines, to urban policy in places such as Massachusetts. This circulation of U.S. public health experts between the imperial center and the colonial periphery formulated colonially informed skills, ideas, and experiences into standard practices at U.S. health education, government, and industrial institutions (Anderson 2006, 1–5, 52, 61).

Similarly, Dr. Kitasato affirmed his medical science credentials at the Conference and opened the Kitasato Institute for laboratory and preventative medicine in 1914. Kitasato's apprentices, from this Institute, moved into key government positions in colonial Taiwan and Korea, further spreading Kitasato's modern laboratory and preventative medicine ideas (Lei 2020, 53, 88). With regard to Manchuria, Rogaski (2020, 135) argues that "Plague was also a central event that helped shape Japan's imagining of Manchuria and, along with this imagining, shaped Japan's governance and scientific infrastructure in the region." Here, the Manchurian plague crisis provided an opportunity for Japan to repackage its colonial project in southern Manchuria as a public health mission. The International Plague Conference resolutions legitimated Japanese colonial expansion in Manchuria through activities such as vaccination campaigns and the establishment of medical schools, while providing political legitimacy to develop colonial infrastructure projects such as railways and urbanized areas (Summers 2012, 143; Rogaski 2004, 260; Buchanan 2024, 359; Rogaski 2020, 144). The Japanese-controlled South Manchuria Railway acted like a syringe, injecting Japanese colonial public health education and expeditions into Manchurian towns. Public health and transport infrastructure, according to Mukden Conference recommendations, worked to bolster Japanese political aspirations within Manchuria. Outside of Manchuria, Japan's colonial administrations implemented public health institutions to govern the Taiwanese and Korean colonies through the 1910s and 1920s. The centering and militarization of public health and science through the deployment of sanitary police was identified as stemming from the Manchurian plague experience (Summers 2012, 137; Peckham 2016, 216; Rogaski 2004, 260). The Mukden Conference provided an international convention and framework on public health to legitimate Japanese imperial expansion and colonial possession. Soon after the Mukden Conference, revolution rocked China. Summers explains that as the Chinese revolution swept through China in October 1911, ending the Qing imperial system and establishing the Republic of China, Russia stepped away from Manchuria and Japan watched from a distance in the hope that the domestic fallout and rivalry from the revolution would break China's territorial sovereignty in the region (Summers 2012, 146).

Despite the political challenges and changes incited by the 1911 Republican Revolution, the Mukden Conference resolutions remained important to the new Republican government's political aspirations (Yu 2014, 94). The Mukden Conference cemented Wu Lien-teh as a renowned and respected medical science expert who gained the trust of Viceroy Hsi-Liang, the Manchurian people, and the international community. This prominence gave political and scientific confidence to Wu Lien-teh to establish the Manchurian Plague Prevention Service in 1912, described as China's first modern public health institution. Medically, the Manchurian Plague Prevention Service protected and promoted public health in Northeast China through medical care, research, education, professional training, and advice on national medical affairs. Politically, the Manchurian Plague Prevention Service was deployed to consolidate Chinese Republican sovereignty in northern Manchuria through its expanding public health administration. To achieve this goal, the Manchurian Plague Prevention Service acted as an agent of the central government through its application of modern medical-scientific practices and policies validated at the Mukden Conference (Nathan 1967, 75–76). The Manchurian Plague Prevention Service mollified Western imperial observers by applying the same medical standards and principles that Japan or Russia would have applied if they had imposed their administrative sovereignty over Manchuria. The Prevention Service allowed China to gain perceived sovereign recognition over the territory through the acknowledgement of the international medical-science community. Wu, as the leader of the Manchurian Plague Prevention Service, embodied China's visible status within the international scientific and political communities through his publicized heroics during the Manchurian plague crisis and credentials as organizer of the Mukden Conference (Nathan 1967, 77). This elevated status within the international science community was further cultivated through his presence at the Hague Opium Conferences in 1911, in plague research publications, attendance at the prestigious biennial Far Eastern Association of Tropical Medicine conferences, and public health work with the League of Nations in Europe (Flohr 1996, 374).

Conclusion: Closing Scene

> "The world, and certainly this Empire, will largely benefit as the result of the [conference delegates'] valuable services."
> Hsi-Liang, Viceroy of the Three Eastern Provinces of Manchuria (Wu 2014, 70)

The International Plague Conference marked a collective resolution of the Manchurian plague crisis and the ascendance of laboratory science into an international tool of shared modernity and sovereign statecraft. The Mukden Conference opened on 3 April 1911, celebrating Qing China's triumph over the devastating plague, paying homage to the international cooperation involved, and asserting the societal value of modern science and public health successes in stopping the epidemic crisis. Scholars demonstrated that these medical-scientific and political dimensions were most consequential during the epidemic crisis and its resolution. By incorporating this Rosenbergian framing of an epidemic as a narrative of Three-Acts, I gave critical visibility and engagement with the diverse people, places, and factors that informed the Manchurian plague crisis, while centering the International Plague Conference as a key event of collective resolution. Here, eleven imperial nations and their renowned scientists, such as Japan's Dr. Kitasato, Dr. Strong of the United States, and Professor Zabolotny of Russia, attended the Conference to study the novel plague and provide recommendations to the Chinese government. Under the guidance of the president of the Conference, Dr. Wu Lien-teh, the delegates spent four weeks evaluating and discussing findings at Mukden, while also travelling to Dairen and Harbin.

This examination of the nature of the Mukden Conference's collective action drew attention to implications of colonial medicine and state sovereignty for participating nations. In the region, colonial medicine played a critical role in promoting state administration and sovereignty in occupied territories such as the Philippines and Taiwan. As such, this article used Rosenberg's Three-Act narrative framework to unpack how people, places, and spaces presented and enacted colonial medicine as a laboratory-scientific procedure through delegate beliefs, experiences, and connections to ideas of modern medical science over the four-week period of the Conference. I argued that modern laboratory science functioned as a shared procedural belief that connected these delegates. Notably, delegates deployed modern laboratory science to locate problems, authorize their identification, and suggest solutions. The recommendations agreed upon by the delegates magnified medical problems into intentions of political order and social control. The Mukden Conference, in this way, constituted internationally standardized and authorized medical science institutions and policies for conference participants. This consensus gave the Qing central government state power to intervene in Manchurian society for global public health safety reasons, while also legitimating U.S. and Japanese colonial projects, in places like Taiwan, Korea, and the Philippines.

Wu Lien-teh personified this new scientific authority and represented the aspirations of the Qing central government and the international scientific community. The Mukden Conference recognized Wu's medical science credentials within the international medical science community and affirmed his trust with Manchurian political elites, like Viceroy Hsi-Liang, and the people of Manchuria. In the wake of sociopolitical turmoil instigated by the 1911 Chinese Republican Revolution and the fractious Warlord Era, Wu's earned political trust and respected scientific credentials granted him the opportunity to establish the Manchurian Plague Prevention Service, built on the Mukden Conference recommendations. During a turbulent period in China, Wu and the Manchurian Plague Prevention Service projected a measurable and internationally acknowledged form of political sovereignty within China and vis-à-vis Japanese and Russian colonial rivals. In consideration of this turmoil, one aspect that could be explored further is the various forms of subaltern resistance to the imposition of this medical science-informed sovereignty by the Conference and its immediate aftermath by Manchurian constituents. Rogaski importantly explores forms of Manchurian resistance against Japanese "hygienic modernity" and vaccination efforts by the 1930s (Rogaski 2020, 155). In this respect, Rosenberg's Three-Act narrative framework might be applied to further understand imperial Japan's implementation of modern public health missions to expand its political presence in Manchuria, challenge Republican Chinese claims to sovereignty in the region, and establish the Manchukuo state using modern public health rhetoric and institutions to legitimate its existence. Similarly, Rosenberg's Three-Act narrative framework would provide a way to compartmentalize simultaneous epidemics, like the Spanish Flu (1918–1920) and cholera epidemic (1899–1923) in a way that can offer useful comparative and relational insights into the unfolding of these historical cases. But when taken all together, the 1911 International Plague Conference proved to be a decisive site for consolidating disparate colonial laboratory sciences scattered across the region into an internationally standardized sociopolitical policy mechanism of the modern state institutions. Republican China (1912–1949) established the Manchurian Plague Prevention Service as an administrative institution to affirm and display its state sovereignty in Manchuria, adopting the similar scientific science governance enacted by Japan in colonial Taiwan and Korea and the United States in the colonial Philippines to validate their colonial projects. The International Plague Conference at Mukden was a significant act for the establishment of the modern biopolitical nation-state institutions in China and critical to the process of establishing modern science as a global convention and public health standard during the early twentieth century.

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The Political Dimensions of Textbooks

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Abstract

The article examines three key aspects of the politicization of textbooks in recent decades. Firstly, it discusses the history of textbook reconciliation, which emerged in the late nineteenth century and aimed to promote peace, reconciliation, and international understanding. This tradition remains an important political dimension of textbooks today. Secondly, the article analyzes the role of international state actors in shaping educational discourse and establishing standards for educational media at both European and global levels. Thirdly, it explores current tendencies in democratic countries to use education and school materials to support state ideologies, legitimize political power, and challenge democratic principles such as freedom of expression, diversity, equality, and inclusion. Finally, it considers how future textbook revision efforts can address these challenges.

Keywords

Textbooks, UNESCO, Council of Europe, Textbook Revision, Textbook Politics, Teaching Material, Multilateral Textbook Activities, History Education, Historical Revisionism

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Introduction

This article deals with the political dimension of textbooks in a European and global context. It focuses on the analysis of educational policy documents, recommendations from international organizations and scholarly literature on textbook revision and history didactics and combines a historical perspective on the development of international textbook revision since the late 19th century with a comparative analysis of current transnational initiatives within the context of new political challenges. It takes into account both bilateral and multilateral textbook projects and the role of international organizations such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe in the development of standards, guidelines, and monitoring instruments. Methodologically, the article draws on approaches from discourse analysis and historical education research by examining how political institutions and social conflicts influence the content, narratives, and didactic principles of textbooks. One of the article's original aspects is that it adopts a perspective rooted in the history of politics and ideas by analyzing textbook policy within the tensions among democracy, nationalism, memory culture, and international understanding. Case studies from Europe, the Middle East, and the United States serve to comparatively highlight different forms of the politicization of educational media and to discuss current challenges for international textbook work.

Based on the assumption that textbooks embody values that states want to convey to the young generation, and that these values and the knowledge they convey are often the subject of social controversy, the article focuses on three aspects of the politicization of textbooks that have manifested themselves in recent decades. Following a brief overview of the field of research, the second part of this article summarizes the history of textbook reconciliation because, starting from the end of the 19th century, international textbook work was shaped under the sign of reconciliation, peacemaking and international understanding – an approach that is still an important part of the political dimension of textbooks today. In the third part, the role of international state actors is taken into account in order to show how these actors influence the European, but also global educational semantics and try to establish general standards with regard to educational media. The fourth part deals with current tendencies in democratic countries to put education – and especially materials used in schools-at the service of state ideologies in order to legitimize political claims to power and to question democratic rights such as freedom of expression and social achievements such as diversity, equality, and inclusion.[1] The article concludes with some observations about the way in which future textbook revision activities can find responses to current challenges in a changing political context.

Research Context

Over the past few decades, research on textbooks and their political dimensions has evolved into an interdisciplinary field that brings together historical education research, history didactics, curriculum research, and political and cultural studies. The starting point for many studies is the assumption that textbooks are not neutral repositories of knowledge, but rather reproduce social power relations, normative ideas, and political interests (Apple and Christian-Smith 1991). Textbooks are therefore regarded as central media for the formation of national identity, collective memory, and political socialization. Accordingly, they are frequently the subject of social and political conflicts (Repoussi 2006; Brunner 2013).

A central research focus lies on international textbook revision and its role in peacekeeping and reconciliation. Historical studies show that attempts have been made since the early 20th century to dismantle nationalist enemy images and stereotypical representations in textbooks (Bechet 2008; Schüddekopf 1967). After World War II in particular, numerous bilateral and multilateral initiatives for textbook revision emerged, based on academic cooperation and international understanding

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1 Sections of this article are taken from Fuchs and Westermeyer 2026 and from Fuchs 2024. I would like to thank Wibke Westermeyer for her research into censorship in education and educational media.

(Faure 2015; Fuchs 2024). Research on Franco-German, German-Polish, and Southeast European projects emphasizes the importance of multi-perspective approaches and the development of shared narratives, while also pointing to political conflicts, differing didactic traditions, and limited implementation in schools (Defrance and Pfeil 2013; Fajfer 2013; Pingel 2013).

Another area of research concerns the role of international organizations such as UNESCO and the Council of Europe. Studies show that these actors have established global standards for democracy, human rights, and peace education since 1945 (Kulnazarova and Ydesen 2017; Pingel 2020). The Council of Europe, in particular, developed concepts for multi-perspective history education and promoted a European dimension in history teaching (Stobart 1999; Stradling 2001). Furthermore, research focuses intensively on so-called "history wars," that is, social conflicts over historical narratives and memory politics (Linenthal and Engelhardt 1996; McIntyre and Clark 2003; Liakos 2009). Such disputes particularly concern controversial topics such as colonialism, genocides, memories of war, or national founding myths. Studies on East Asia, Southeast Europe, and the Middle East show that school textbooks often serve as central arenas for political disputes (Saaler 2005; Nozaki and Selden 2009; Podeh and Alayan 2013; Pingel 2025). At the same time, research on post-conflict societies highlights the importance of history education for reconciliation and transformation processes (Bentrovato, Korostelina, and Schulze 2016; Cajani, Lässig, and Repoussi 2019).

Currently, attention is increasingly focused on democratic backsliding, censorship, and the political instrumentalization of education. In the United States in particular, the debate surrounding the "1619 Project" and the "1776 Commission" is interpreted as an expression of a fundamental conflict over national identity, racism, and democracy (Hannah-Jones 2021; American Historical Association 2021; Esparza 2023). Studies on "educational gag orders," attacks on diversity programs, and state control of curricular content show that textbooks are increasingly becoming part of authoritarian and nationalist culture wars (Ravitch 2024; PEN America 2024; Jackson and Sondah 2025; Fuchs and Westermeyer 2026).

The Revision of Textbooks

Educational media and textbooks in particular are more than neutral vehicles of knowledge. They embody and reproduce underlying norms and values, convey constructions of identity, and generate specific ways of perceiving the world. Through educational media in schools, societies impart knowledge, values, and skills that are considered relevant to the younger generation. The content presented in educational media not only reflects social practice but is also part of that practice. Educational media, their production, their use in the classroom, and the pedagogical routines associated with them have a significant impact on discourse, images of humanity, and ideas about teaching and learning. Teaching materials are instruments of educational policy control (cf. Apple and Christian-Smith 1991). In many countries, textbooks are subject to approval procedures designed to ensure that the books are consistent with the curricula and that teachers adhere to the curriculum guidelines. Textbooks are mediators between the intended and the implemented curriculum. As a result, they are often the subject of controversial social negotiation processes in which different interpretations, interests, and values collide. All this means that textbooks are frequently contested, both within and between societies, and often become focal points of political, social, religious, and ethnic conflicts. Disputes over textbooks typically revolve around questions of national identity, historical interpretation, and the legitimization of collective memory (Repoussi 2006; McIntyre and Clark 2003).

It is therefore not surprising that the moment they were established as a mass school medium in the emerging national education systems in Europe, textbooks became the subject of international controversy on the one hand, but were also regarded as a medium by which conflicts between nations should be avoided through education for peace and international understanding. This happened in Europe at the end of the 19th century, when the first attempts were made to revise textbooks on the eve of the outbreak of the First World War, particularly from those involved in the pacifist movement. But it was not until the founding of the League of Nations in 1919 and the emergence of numerous non-state education organizations after the end of the war that a multifaceted pool of participants, extending beyond European borders, was established (Schüddekopf, 1967; Bechet 2008).

The idea of textbook revision was introduced by the Union of Japanese Teachers at the first meeting of the League of Nations in 1920, and this led to the formation of a Sub-Committee on the International Textbook of History within the League's International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation in 1923. Two years later, the League of Nations passed the "Casares Resolution", which introduced international checks on national textbooks and curricula (Fuchs 2024).

In the interwar period, a total of 22 international organisations and 44 national organisations in Europe and South America explored questions related to textbook revision (La Révision 1932). Among these organizations, the first transnational initiative to address textbook revision was the Norden Association (Föreningerne Norden), founded in 1919, which comprised representatives from Scandinavian countries whose objective was to rid their respective textbooks of damaging stereotypes through mutual analysis. A joint volume was published in 1940 titled "Contentious Issues in Nordic History" (Omstridda spörsmål i Nordens historia), which was the first attempt to produce a joint, transnational publication on history textbooks (Immersjö and Lindmark 2010). A declaration regarding the teaching of history, which was signed by 26 states in 1937, constituted an intergovernmental accord, but it came too late to be effectively implemented.

The aim of these activities, during a period when the threat of war was increasing, was to try to find ways of maintaining peace through a field which had until then not been of great relevance for international politics, namely education. Textbook revision was seen as a suitable means of achieving this end. However, the overall success of the different multi- and bilateral initiatives remained minimal because there was no organisation in a position to coordinate the diverse activities and measures necessary to establish any internationally effective agreement on textbook revision. There was also no international understanding on precisely what textbook revision should entail or how it should be realised, so that although there were networking relationships between organisations, these were predominantly arranged and maintained by individual advocacy. In addition, already at this time national history experts feared an undermining of academic standards by applying external normative standards derived from international actors and devaluing national traditions resulted in a rejection of more extensive international measures.

After the Second World War, attempts at textbook revision continued in the form of institutionalised bilateral textbook commissions under the umbrella of the International Institute for Textbook Research in Braunschweig, which was founded in 1951. The aim of the bilateral textbook commissions was to apply an academically founded understanding of controversial issues of common history, to ensure that factual errors, and above all enemy images and stereotypes, were eliminated from history books. This was intended to provide the right conditions for reconciliation among European societies after the experiences of the Second World War, to foster cooperation within the framework of the European unification process and to create a democratically constructed perception of history among teachers and students.

Overall, 34 initiatives on textbook revision in Western Europe took place between 1945 and 1989: of these, 29 were bilateral and 5 were regional. Of the 23 participating countries, Germany and France were the most active – taking part in 18 and 10 bilateral activities, respectively. There were also 18 bilateral initiatives on textbooks between countries in Eastern and Western Europe and 23 multilateral and 10 bilateral initiatives between European and non-European countries (Faure 2015). The upheavals of 1989 and 1990 initially appeared to lead to an expansion of textbook revision. In 1994, for example, the first German-Russian textbook conference for historians and geographers took place in Braunschweig, and new initiatives were launched in the three Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. New bilateral initiatives also began in Western Europe in the early 1990s, such as between France and Great Britain and between Germany and Spain. At present, there are approximately 30 bilateral initiatives across Europe that address textbook issues (Fuchs 2024).

Overall, it can be said that the key output of all these activities was the development of relevant documents, guidelines, methodological tools and teaching materials. At the core of these activities was the desire to create a consensus-based approach that aimed to reach an understanding on common ways to depict the past. Topics on which no compromise could be found were often not included in the recommendations and thus omitted from textbooks (Pingel 2010).

Textbook revision has been dominated by its aim to liberate textbooks from nationalistic, chauvinistic and biased interpretations in order to contribute towards peace and international understanding. Its activities were deeply influenced by their normative and, in many cases, highly political goals. Textbook revision has been marked by the tension between normative assumptions (e.g. that the improvement of textbooks has a direct impact on learning outcomes), political expectations (e.g. that a good textbook makes a good citizen), and academic objectivity. Even though the majority of bi- and multilateral textbook revision activities today has distanced itself from this normative and political point of departure, the latter continues to play a key role, particularly in cases of war-affected or post-conflict societies. Here, textbook research—primarily analyses of stereotyping and enemy images in textbooks and other teaching materials—provides political recommendations for the revision of such materials.

While textbook revision remains the central political reference point for bi- and multilateral textbook activities to this day, another aspect has gained in importance over the past two decades. It is not primarily about the attempt at reconciliation, but about the production of multilateral teaching materials, in order to impart historical knowledge beyond nation-state borders, to establish transnational references to national history and to impart didactic principles such as multiperspectivity, controversy and source criticism.

The range of teaching materials produced over the past two decades can be divided into two key formats: (a) binational collections of source materials, teacher handouts, and teaching aids; and (b) jointly written common textbooks for two or more countries.

(a) There are three types of bi- and multilateral teaching materials (see Fuchs 2024):

Firstly, multinational collections of source material that carefully approach controversial topics and open new perspectives. A significant example is the Joint History Project conducted by the Center for Democracy and Reconciliation in Southeast Europe (CDRSEE) between 1998 and 2016. Historians and teachers from South Eastern Europe created 6 volumes of source material covering the period from the Ottoman Empire to the end of the Second World War, and of which 4 were published in a total of 11 languages. The remaining two books were published in four languages and addressed the Cold War and the subsequent transitional period in Europe up to 2008, including the wars in the 1990s (http://www.jointhistory.net/index-eng.html) (Fajfer 2013).

A second type of jointly created material is binational teacher handouts. Their underlying objective is to compensate for deficiencies in mutual portrayals and to systematically break down stereotypes. They therefore contain didactically prepared topics for teachers in both countries.[2]

Thirdly, online portals have recently been used more frequently in order to make diverse material and drafts of lesson plans available in digital form. Such material includes multinational and supranational audiovisual teaching media that provides multifaceted material based on digitized collections, suitable for a range of educational levels and in different languages (‘Hi-Story’ [https://hi-storylessons.eu/de/] and ‘Historiana’ [https://historiana.eu]).

(b) Joint textbooks are the second key format and are the ambitious goal of international textbook work. The initial attempts to compose an internationally binding textbook for cultural history, although ultimately unsuccessful, can be traced back to the interwar period. Joint textbook initiatives also continued after 1945. Among these was an initiative by an Austrian publishing house (Jugend and Volk) in the early 1970s, which resulted in a series of bilateral history book projects with neighbouring

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2 Such handouts include teaching aids created for multi-ethnic regions that extend across national borders (trinational textbook for the upper Rhine [http://www.crdp-strasbourg.fr/ork/indexd.htm] and ‘Pruzzenland’ [https://www.pruzzenland.eu/]).

states, including a joint project between Austria and Italy, which was written in tandem and published in two languages (Furlani and Wandruszka 1974).

Another was an initiative launched by a French banker (Frédéric Delouche) in 1988, which brought together 15 historians from 13 countries and resulted, four years later, in a transnational European history textbook called 'The Illustrated History of Europe. A Unique Portrait of Europe's Common History' (Pingel 2013).

Attempts to develop joint history textbooks in East Asia started in 2001 with the founding of the China-Japan-Korea Common History Tri-National Committee by South Korean, Chinese, and Japanese historians and educationalists. Since then, they have published several volumes of the history of East Asia for students. Although these textbooks were not approved by the respective political authority and their usage in schools remained very limited these books are a very important milestone on the path toward finding a common understanding of the contested past in East Asia (China-Japan-Korea Common History Tri-National Committee 2010; Fuchs, Kasahara and Saaler 2018; Yang and Sin 2013).

All these joint textbooks were designed to be used as additional learning and teaching materials in the classroom. They neither followed the respective national curricula nor were they officially approved as textbooks by state authorities. The first joint textbook that was based on curricula and became approved by the governments was the German-French History Textbook that was published in three volumes between 2006 and 2011.[3] Although it reached wide attention and is considered as a "model" for joint textbooks, its implementation into German and French schools remained limited mainly due to the reform of history curricula in France in 2010. Its use was confined to the border regions of both countries. In particular, the third volume of the textbook was mainly used in specific classes of bilingual schools or European departments of

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[3] Histoire/Geschichte vol.1 Europa und die Welt von der Antike bis 1815 (2011), vol 2: Europa und die Welt vom Wiener Kongress bis 1945 (2008), vol. 3: Europa und die Welt seit 1945 (2006)

secondary schools (Defrance and Pfeil 2013).

The most recent example for a common bilateral textbook is the joint German-Polish History Textbook “Europa–Unsere Geschichte / Europa. Nasza historia.” The proposal to develop a joint German-Polish history book goes back to an agreement reached in 2008 between the then German and Polish foreign ministers. Therefore, from the beginning this project had a high symbolic value at the political stage. The German-Polish Textbook Commission, which was founded in 1972, was commissioned to organize this project which was coordinated by the Georg Eckert Institute and the Center for Historical Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences. It took all together 12 years until this project was finished. The main achievements of the first stage of the project from 2008 to 2011 included

- a comparative analysis of the respective teaching programs and curricula in Germany and Poland prepared by the GEI;
- the appointment of a Steering Committee as a political body, which on the German side was made up of representatives of the Federal Foreign Office and the Ministries of Education and Cultural Affairs of the German federal states, and on the Polish side was represented by the Ministry of National Education, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage;
- the appointment of a Council of Experts consisting of around 30 German and Polish historians and history didactics experts;
- the publication of the “Recommendations” in 2012 in German and Polish, which formed the content framework of the work and provided the scientific and didactic basis for the development of the four volumes (Gemeinsame Deutsch-Polnische Schulbuchkommission 2012).

In the second phase of the project, the four volumes of the textbook were produced in two identical language versions (Deutsch-Polnische Schulbuchkommission 2016–2020). In its fifteen meetings overall, the

Steering Committee set the political and financial course, which was not always an easy task given the fact that there were a number of personnel and political changes in the representatives of the German and Polish ministries between 2008 and 2020. While the Expert Council was responsible for writing the four volumes, the publishers were responsible for the didactic implementation and the overall layout. The two coordinating academic institutes were in charge of coordination between all participants, organized all translations of the chapters, which were written equally by a Polish and a German author. In addition to publishing editors, academic secretaries and experts from both countries, around 25 authors and 50 translators from Germany and Poland were involved in the project. Altogether, around eighty week-long working meetings and fifty virtual meetings as well as about 250 phone calls were necessary to finish the volumes.

The aim of the German-Polish textbook was to develop a bilateral textbook on European history based on the given curricula in both countries. All participants attached great importance to leaving room for dialog and mutual interpretation. The textbook therefore reflects the diversity of the bilateral history between the two countries, that was characterized by periods of peaceful coexistence as well as conflicts. It also took into account different opinions about which historical events should be included and competing interpretations by the authors. Each volume of the textbook is based on two didactic principles: the multi-perspectivity of the sources and the presentation of different interpretations of an event from the respective perspectives of historians from different periods. In order to show the diversity of history not only from a macro perspective but also from a micro perspective, each volume contains modules of regional history. This is one of the innovative aims of the textbook, because, by adopting a regional perspective, the textbook moves beyond the level of states and nations.

However, the authors had to face various challenges due to different traditions and concepts. Among them were:

- Different concept of textbooks: Whereas Germans regard textbooks as a combination of textbooks and workbooks focusing on sources and working materials for learners the Polish authors had a more restricted idea of textbooks as a teaching tool that concentrates on the authors' narratives.

- Different didactic approach: Germans tend to reduce the amount of content in order to allow the students to trace the development lines of larger time periods. However, the Polish authors pursue comprehensiveness and emphasize historical events and data.
- Difference of approach: In German textbooks the focus is – besides political history—on social and everyday history including, among other things, the history of women and the underprivileged. Polish textbooks emphasize political history, military history, economic history, the history of great men and of major events.
- Differences in the function of sources: Textual and visual sources in German textbooks have the function to go further than the author's text by problematizing their content. In Polish textbooks, sources serve to illustrate the author's text.
- Differences in the function of tasks for the learners: In German textbooks the tasks and questions are open and designed to enable students to question historical facts and to be able to explain, assess and examine them. The tasks in Polish textbooks serve to secure and confirm the knowledge acquired.
- Differences in the function of reconstruction drawings (such as castles, buildings, etc.): Such reconstruction drawings in German textbooks emphasize functionality and practicality, whereas in Polish textbooks emotionality is at the forefront.

In general, it took six versions before a chapter was finalized. The cultural authorities and ministries of education of both countries appointed experts to review the volumes and to check whether they follow the German and Polish requirements. Whereas the four volumes were approved by 15 out of 16 federal states in Germany right after their publication, the Polish government initially approved only the first three volumes. The fourth volume dealing with the controversial 20th century was not allowed to be used as an official textbook. However, after the change of government in Poland in 2023, the fourth volume was also approved in Poland.

The book represents a high point in the bilateral efforts to achieve German-Polish understanding and a common understanding of European history and German-Polish relations. Far beyond the actual subject matter, the merit of the joint textbook lies in the fact that, in the situation of a European identity crisis that has been ongoing for several years, it was possible to conceive and implement a bilateral project that transcended individual national interests.

From Textbook Revision to Standardization and Monitoring

Besides the numerous bi- and multilateral textbook initiatives undertaken by civil society actors, the Council of Europe and UNESCO have been main players in international textbooks affairs with numerous projects and activities at the intergovernmental level. However, their goal was not textbook revision but the establishment of international textbook semantics, norms and standards.

The activities started by the League of Nations were continued by UNESCO after 1945 that has held from its founding up to now countless expert meetings, conferences and seminars discussing work on textbooks in general and the content of textbooks in particular, and developed numerous guidelines, templates for curricula and recommendations for the improvement of textbooks for use by teachers, publishing houses and education policymakers (Kulnazarova and Ydesen 2017). Since the new millennium. Such activities include academic studies, the organization of conferences, training programs, education projects for young people and participation in educational reforms. Between 1989 and 2007 it held 13 conferences, seminars and expert meetings and between 1989 and 2017 it published 36 handbooks, guidelines, framework directives and targets as well as academic studies on textbooks. Recently completed and currently running projects include Arab Science and Engineering Interactive Textbooks (2014–2023), Inclusive Education through Accessible Digital Textbooks (2019–2022), Providing Primary School Students with Inspiring and Motivational Reading Materials (2019–2022), Technical Assistance to Include GCED and ESD in Learning Materials for Mexico (2020–2022) and Phase II of Integrating 21st-Century Skills in Curricula and School Textbooks (Grades 4–6) (2020–2021). In the last few years, UNESCO has also produced up-to-date guidelines and recommendations regarding global issues such as racism, diversity, anti-Semitism and plurality (e.g. UNESCO and MGIEP 2017; UNESCO 2024). Traditional recommendations directed at educational policymakers and practitioners remained part of this process (Fuchs 2024).

Parallel to UNESCO's activities, the Council of Europe was examining how Europe and its history were portrayed in textbooks and classrooms in Europe. Between 1953 and 1983 alone, the Council of Europe held 12 conferences on history textbooks and history teaching, during which it examined almost 1000 textbooks from 17 countries (Stobart 1999; Luntinen 1988). The goal of these activities was not so much reconciliation anymore but rather the attempt to foster a common historical consciousness of Europe, to create the idea of a "shared" European past and to build bridges to overcome contested memory cultures throughout Europe (Fuchs 2024).

The Council of Europe's project, "Learning and Teaching about the History of Europe in the 20th Century" (1997–2002) was the Council's first major intergovernmental initiative on history education. It emerged against the backdrop of the political upheavals following the Cold War and the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia. The goal was to further develop history education as a contribution to democracy, human rights, and European understanding by promoting a multi-perspective and competency-based approach to history education. National master narratives were to be supplemented by a critically reflective engagement with history that incorporates different perspectives, historical controversies, and key social issues such as migration, dictatorships, or the culture of remembrance. The project focused on source-based learning and the development of historical judgment skills. In addition to textbooks, museums, archives, and digital media were also incorporated as learning environments. Among the most significant outcomes are numerous teaching materials as well as Robert Stradling's handbook (Stradling 2001, Pingel 2000). The political impact of the project was particularly significant: it formed the basis for the Council of Europe's Recommendation (2001) 15 on history education in 21st-century Europe and shaped central guiding principles of European history didactics.

At the beginning of the 2000s the Council of Europe focussed primarily on South Eastern Europe, particularly within the framework of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe (1999–2004), which emphasised the development of programmes and guidelines for history teaching, teacher training and the creation of new textbooks after the war in the Balkans. Other programmes such as 'The teaching of history in multicultural societies and border areas' centred on Russia and Japan (1999–2001) where the past, present and future of history teaching in these two countries was discussed, particularly the question of how Japan was depicted in history teaching in the Russian Federation and vice versa.

One of the results of the "European Dimension in History Teaching" project (2002–2006) was the creation of three pedagogic instruments with the goal of enabling secondary school learners as well as teachers and trainers to incorporate a multiperspective European approach into their teaching. Another project, "Shared Histories for a Europe without Dividing Lines" (2010–2014), led to the production of an e-book that used innovative digital approaches and contained examples for teaching materials that outlined significant historical examples of interaction and convergence within Europe as well as general topics related to European history, such as human rights and industrialisation.

Within the past decade two new forms of international cooperation in textbook research and history education were established that aim at enlarging the scope of international textbook activities. Central aims are monitoring, standardization and quality enhancing. With respect to monitoring and standardization, the Council of Europe intensified its efforts in the field of history education in Europe. The Steering Committee for Education Policy and Practice of the Council of Europe (established in 2013) relaunched its intergovernmental program on history education in 2020 and produced a Reference Framework for Education on Democratic Culture which aims to become the central reference document for school instruction and is supposed to serve as a standard for democracy education (Council of Europe 2018). In the same year, the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe was founded upon an initiative of the French government. It operates as an enlarged partial agreement with currently 19 member states and aims at collecting and making available, through a series of regular and thematic reports, factual information on the state of history teaching in all participating countries. By monitoring the state of the art in history education OHTE acts as a reference institution for curriculum and textbook development as well as teaching practice for the member states.[4]

Another approach to community building, standardization, and quality assurance was chosen by the Georg Eckert Institute that in 2020 founded the European Forum for Reconciliation and Cooperation in History and Social Sciences Education (EFREC).[5] EFREC aims at creating a cooperation network of bilateral and multilateral textbook initiatives in Europe through an institutionalized European forum and therefore at promoting and combining efforts for historical reconciliation by providing tools, sharing experiences, developing material, and ensuring quality education through expert workshops and seminars for educators and educational media producers. EFREC subsequently provides a roof under which textbook initiatives can be housed and where they will be encouraged to exchange information on products and share their experiences, to utilize new or existing synergies and to develop standards for textbook revision in order to expand and elevate bilateral relationships to create

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[4] The Observatory on History Teaching in Europe - Observatory on History Teaching in Europe. Accessed 2026.06.03 at https://www.coe.int/en/web/observatory-history-teaching.

[5] EFREC: Home. Accessed 2026.06.03 at https://efrec.gei.de/.

Europe-wide cooperation. As a result, European countries and institutions should have greater capacity to strengthen the cohesive power of the European idea among young people and therefore the future ability of European institutions to act, particularly in conflicts with populist and nationalist movements and ideologies.

To combine efforts and to increase successful measures EFREC cooperates closely with the Observatory of the Council of Europe. While EFREC specifically focuses on curricula and teaching materials addressed within textbook revision programs, OHTE publishes reports on the state of the art of history education of its member states. The creation of these reports is supported or even conducted by EFREC. Whereas EFREC embodies non-governmental activities, the Observatory works in the interest of its member countries. This new form of non-governmental and governmental partnership enhances history education throughout Europe by providing a structure for the systematic and sustainable implementation of standards, norms and internationally produced material into educational practice. So far, three reports have been published by OHTE and its partners in Europe.[6] They are part of a research-based systematic monitoring of the dissemination and impact of thematic topics and standards in history education and aim to ensure the high quality of textbooks, their continuous improvement and thus sustainable impact within different national contexts in and beyond Europe.

However, there are few studies on the impact of internationally developed standards on textbook writing. As a result, it is difficult to say to what extent these interventions have actually changed textbook content. The study on Economic Crises in History Teaching concludes that in terms of content, national, European, and Western perspectives dominate. Economic crises outside Europe and North America, as well as their impact on societies in Africa, Asia, or Latin America, are rarely addressed. Local and everyday historical perspectives also play a comparatively mi-

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6 Research and Reports - Observatory on History Teaching in Europe. Accessed 2026.06.03 at https://www.coe.int/en/web/observatory-history-teaching/reports.

nor role in curricula and textbooks, even though teachers incorporate them more frequently in their lessons. History instruction combines political, economic, and social perspectives, however, cultural perspectives and the representation of social diversity – such as regarding gender, origin, or religion – are significantly underrepresented. Didactically, curricula and textbooks primarily promote analytical and critical thinking, particularly through source-based work and discussions. Project-based and interdisciplinary approaches, on the other hand, have so far played a lesser role, although many teachers prefer interdisciplinary approaches (Council of Europe 2025).

Another study on Palestinian textbooks also paints a mixed picture: On the one hand, the textbooks are clearly aligned with international educational standards and incorporate key UNESCO principles such as human rights, tolerance, pluralism, and active citizenship. Particular emphasis is placed on equality, social participation, and peaceful coexistence between Muslims and Christians. Issues related to women's rights, children's rights, and inclusion are also given significant attention. On the other hand, the textbooks reflect the Israeli-Palestinian conflict largely from a Palestinian perspective. Israel is frequently portrayed as an "occupier," while the existence of the State of Israel is often omitted from maps and illustrations. Violence perpetrated by Palestinians is sometimes interpreted as legitimate resistance. Individual passages contain escalatory or anti-Semitic themes, particularly in some religious and language-related textbooks. Overall, the study highlights the tension between human rights education aligned with global educational standards and a conflict-driven national narrative that is strongly shaped by the political and social conditions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Georg Eckert Institute 2021).

Textbook Politics

In view of new global societal challenges, territorial conflicts, and anti-democratic developments, the requirements for a form of textbook research that promotes political and historical understanding and reconciles cultures have become considerably more complex. Recently, the political dimension of textbooks has become very prominent in various countries within and outside Europe. Three observations can be made:

Firstly, the politization of textbooks and therefore education continues to be particularly salient in societies affected by violent conflict or undergoing post-conflict transformation. This politization concerns the interpretation of historical events, the selection of content deemed worthy of inclusion in textbooks, and the broader construction of national traditions and identities. In the past decades in two conflict-ridden regions international attempts to revise textbooks became very striking: the Balkans (Pingel 2025; Dimou 2009) and the Near and Middle East, ultimately serving to support political and social processes of reconciliation and the reification of textbook content (Firer and Adwan 2004). In the case of the Near and Middle East, reconciliation aimed both to support the dialogue among Arab states and, in the context of Israel and Palestine, to contribute to a mutual understanding of different interpretations of history, objectifying their portrayal (Podeh and Alayan 2018). However, due to the outbreak of violence and war these efforts were not successful.

Secondly, nationalist movements in many European countries as well as the process of de-globalisation are leading to a resurgence of a wide variety of stereotypes and forms of nationalism that counteract the aims of international cooperation in history education. In numerous countries, a neo-conservative revision of history has been pushed by the political powers that jeopardizes the results of the textbook revision. In numerous countries, a series of conflicts over textbooks stemmed from so-called 'history wars' (Liakos 2009; Bentrovato, Korostelina, and Schulze 2016): public disputes about the formation of national traditions, the securing of legitimacy and the construction of identity within a society (Korostelina and Lässig 2013).

Prominent examples include debates over the Armenian genocide in Turkey, the colonial past in France, the representation of Indigenous peoples in Australia, and the Enola Gay controversy in the United States (Repoussi 2008; McIntyre and Clark 2003; Linenthal and Engelhardt

1996; Cajani, Lässig, and Korostelina 2019). East Asia is another region that has been marked by textbook conflicts for a long time. Since 2001, historians and educators have been discussing controversial issues and have developed various bi- and multilateral textbooks and teaching material. East Asian textbook revision activities have caused fierce political debates but have also been a tool to enhance academic communication among China, Japan, and South Korea (Saaler 2005; Nozaki and Selden 2009; Fukuoka 2018).

Thirdly, over the past two decades, a marked erosion of democratic structures and norms can be observed worldwide. Autocratic, totalitarian, and dictatorial systems have gained influence, while democratic regimes are increasingly challenged and destabilized by authoritarian populism. A wide range of democracy indices points to a sustained global decline in democratic structures and values. Notably, this regression does not affect only so-called fragile or young democracies; it is equally evident in political systems long regarded as consolidated liberal democracies such as Hungary, India, Brazil and the United States, where a gradual shift from formerly liberal democracies toward illiberal forms of governance can be observed.

Liberal-democratic societies have been confronted with resurgent ethnonationalism, patriarchal ideologies, racism, misogyny, queerphobia, and Islamophobia. A defining feature of these transformation processes is the rise of group-focused hostility directed against social, cultural, or religious diversity, accompanied by growing historical revisionism aimed at reviving nationalist narratives previously considered obsolete. These dynamics are not confined to political rhetoric; they manifest in structural and institutional changes. Democratic backsliding typically entails the systematic weakening of democratic institutions, procedures, and normative commitments. Rather than occurring through abrupt regime collapse, such processes tend to unfold incrementally. Through formally legal and ostensibly legitimate measures, governing elites erode checks and balances, undermine judicial independence, restrict media pluralism, and delegitimize political opposition. While each individual measure may appear procedurally defensible, their cumulative effect results in a substantial hollowing out of liberal-democratic achievements (Fuchs and Westermeyer 2026).

A central instrument in these illiberal transformation processes is the politicization of history. By selectively reinterpreting or strategically omitting historical events, political actors seek to homogenize national identity and delegitimize pluralism. Minority perspectives are marginalized, distorted, or silenced, while hegemonic narratives are reframed to legitimize contemporary power structures. Public disputes over national traditions, collective memory, and historical responsibility – particularly concerning the content of school curricula and textbooks – have been conceptualized in the literature as “history wars” as Korostelina and Lässig (2013) and Fuchs and Westermeyer (2026) point out. These conflicts represent more than symbolic struggles; they are arenas in which societal legitimacy, identity construction, and political authority are negotiated.

Textbooks and curricular frameworks constitute especially significant sites of political intervention. The politicization of educational materials has become a key strategy for conservative and nationalist actors seeking to reshape public education in accordance with specific ideological agendas. A noticeable trend in this context is the shift of authority away from independent educational institutions, scholarly bodies, and professional associations toward executive actors and partisan authorities. This development reflects a broader re-politicization of education policy and underscores the intimate connection between knowledge production, identity formation, and political power.

The United States provides a particularly illustrative case. During the first administration of Donald Trump, a more explicit revisionist turn in interpretations of American history began to take shape. This shift became especially visible in the government’s reaction to the 1619 Project. Initiated in 2019 by The New York Times, the project foregrounded the role of slavery and its enduring impact on racism and structural inequality in the United States, marking the 400th anniversary of the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in Virginia. The initiative included essays, podcasts, documentary formats, and educational materials designed for classroom use, and it significantly influenced public debates on historiography, systemic racism, and national identity (Hannah-Jones 2021).

The political controversy surrounding the 1619 Project illustrates how closely historical interpretation is intertwined with contemporary struggles over power and legitimacy. Efforts to discredit or replace critical historical narratives with more celebratory and exclusionary accounts reveal the extent to which history functions as a strategic resource in broader projects of democratic retrenchment. In this sense, the politicization of textbooks and historical discourse should not be understood as a marginal cultural phenomenon, but rather as an integral component of authoritarian transformation strategies aimed at the long-term reconfiguration of democratic orders.

However, it has sparked a broad public debate on these topics. It has been both praised and sharply criticized, particularly for alleged historical distortions. Conservative critics saw it as political indoctrination and an 'anti-American' narrative of history when it comes to the use of the relevant teaching materials in school lessons. Therefore, some states have restricted or banned the use of the material. The Trump administration rejected the 1619 Project as 'ideological propaganda' and 'revisionist history', which the US presented as fundamentally racist. Instead, the focus should be on a patriotic image of history that emphasizes the founding ideals of the USA and largely relativizes critical perspectives on slavery and racism. As a direct political response to the 1619 Project and similar educational approaches, Trump launched the 1776 Commission in 2020 with the aim of promoting a patriotic curriculum that portrays American history as a success story and rejects systemic racism narratives (The President's Advisory 1776 Commission 2021). This commission was deliberately positioned as a contrast and counter-narrative to the 1619 Project as its report, published in 2021, indicates (Esparza 2023; American Historical Association 2021; Ravitch 2024).

Since the beginning of his second term, Trump has taken extensive measures that directly or indirectly restricted the environment in which projects such as the 1619 Project can be discussed. Among them is the presidential executive order "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History," signed by Donald Trump in March 2025, that attempts to whitewash history with regards to slavery and the treatment of the indigenous population, the role of African-Americans in US-American history, the founding myth and therefore the dissemination of history that tallies with the ideology of white supremacy (Trump 2025).

In addition, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) programs have been attacked at all levels, for example, by instructing federal authorities to review training materials and remove programs that disseminate 'anti-American content' (Trump 2020). Institutions based on identity politics or critical theories of race should no longer be funded by the federal government, including museums, which critics see as an attempt to limit anti-racism narratives such as those in African American history (Trump 2025). So-called educational gag orders allow formal censorship by state legislatures in the form of bills that aim to prohibit or restrict the teaching of topics such as racism, gender, and diversity issues. In addition to these, the appointment of loyalists to important positions within the education administration is also a key means of implementing political goals in schools and education in general (Jackson and Sondah 2025).

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter was to highlight the wide range of political dimensions of textbooks: (a) bilateral and multilateral textbook revision with the aim of promoting education for peace and democracy and of influencing politics with its normative claims; (b) international organizations that formulate recommendations for the political level and at the same time establish global semantics and standards; (c) "history wars," which have a major political impact on the way in which societies discuss and negotiate their memory politics; (d) direct state influence through financial or symbolic participation in bi- or multilateral textbook developments and through the (non-)approval process exerting political influence on textbooks; (e) manipulation and censorship by political decision-makers in order to enforce their ideological agendas and thus create legitimacy for their own claims to power.

The way in which these different dimensions manifest themselves depends on the respective political context in which textbooks are produced and memory policies are negotiated. This differs between democracies, illiberal democracies, and autocratic regimes; between countries that are characterized by conflict and violence or are in a stable state; between countries that have come to terms with their past or reconciled with other states and countries in which a critical examination of their own past has not taken place or has only taken place partially.

A key result of international textbook development over the past hundred years is that established procedures for transnational cooperation on textbook issues, particularly with regard to historical and political education, have become established. These procedures are methodologically sound and—thanks to the diversity of international recommendations, teaching materials, and institutional formats—there are standards and tools that have the potential to support the teaching of history in such a way that learners can engage with the past critically, from multiple perspectives, and beyond national history frameworks. From a normative standpoint, this creates the possibility that different interpretations of history do not lead to political conflicts.

However, the results, methods, and formats of international cooperation have been criticized in recent years or called into question through nationalist or xenophobic discourses in numerous European countries. The resurgence of various forms of nationalism and of stereotypes fostered by nationalist movements in many European countries, de-globalization, and so-called “history wars” within many societies have challenged established standards of international textbook work and reignited struggles over historical interpretation. In many countries, political leaders are pushing for a revision of history that throws many standards and methods used in the processes of international textbook revision into question. Basic democratic values cannot be taken for granted anymore in democracies that have turned illiberal.

Consequently, it has become increasingly clear that the content and form of traditional international textbook activities are no longer sufficient. The fact that international tensions and intra-societal conflicts are inflamed not only by social conflicts over the distribution of resources but increasingly also by struggles over the recognition of collective identities illustrates that textbook development must progress beyond eliminating national prejudices to consider new social conflicts and challenges in the context of migration, heterogeneity and diversity.

Textbook revision has increasingly become part of internal conflict transformation and post-conflict reconstruction processes, addressing not only past events but also present identities and future societal orientations. In general, a shift from conflicts between different states to conflicts between different groups within the same state can be observed. In such cases, textbook revision has become part of transitional justice (Pingel 2010). It is therefore not simply a tool for preventing conflict but also aids internal social reconciliation during the reconstruction process and the focus is not primarily on controversial issues in the past, but on the recently ended conflict. Bilateral textbook revision can serve as an instrument for transformation management and conflict transformation in such societies by promoting a multifaceted textbook approach. Such revision must be considered in connection with current challenges such as globalization, migration, and growing heterogeneity and cultural dynamism within societies.

More frequently, the stimuli for textbook revision do not necessarily come from the affected country itself but from external parties, such as international organizations or NGOs. They establish international panels of experts who can be consulted on textbook-related issues. Hence, achieving the right balance between external intervention/mediation and local autonomy and direct responsibility can be challenging. Traditional revision activities frequently relied upon broad domestic state and civic support; however, today such activities often take place within a tense political climate and external groups, such as international organizations have a much larger role. As there are similar challenges in many cases, it is important that common, multilateral standards and best-practice models are developed in order to create and profit from synergies among the numerous textbook activities.

These developments have significantly altered the conditions and expectations of international textbook revision. Projects are now often initiated at earlier stages of conflict, frequently with substantial involvement by international organizations or non-governmental actors, raising questions about power asymmetries, local ownership, and the transferability of bilateral models to internal societal conflicts. Didactically, the focus has shifted from consensus-building to enabling learners to engage critically with multiple interpretations of the past. Textbook revision is increasingly embedded within broader educational agendas, including democracy education, human rights education, and education for sustainable development (Bromley et al. 2010).

Textbooks themselves can neither change society nor directly influence politics; however, they are highly influential mass media that can be misused for manipulation, disinformation, and legitimization of non-democratic political goals. At the same time, textbooks are also educational media that can be used as a means of educating younger generations in humanistic values that contribute to social participation, participatory co-creation of society, and international understanding. This is where the real political power of textbooks should lie.

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Towards a Crip Genealogy of/in Postwar Japan

Tamane TAKEHARA

Abstract

This article addresses the position of disability and debility in the epistemology and history of postwar Japan. Despite postwar Japan's temporal demarcation being defined by a mass-debilitating process, such as the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this vernacular of injury in the military-industrial-academic complex has not been brought to the critical disability context. In mapping out a broader cultural topography of injury, this article attends to mass-debilitating processes such as the atomic bombings and their production of *hibakusha*, weaving it alongside the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and the Independent Living Movement that introduced liberal frameworks of disability into the "rest of Asia." Moving away from a purely identitarian, rights-based approach, this genealogy proposes we destabilize normative scholarly practices that sideline injury as analytically significant, and that we examine the metonymies of injury as much as the explicit enunciation of it as an identity.

Keywords

Critical Disability Studies, Postwar Japan, Cultural History, 1964 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games, *Hibakusha*, Debility, Disability, Epistemology

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Introduction

For those living in the United States, the curative violence of the current administration is an intense presence, from the racial profiling that leads to mass incarceration in privately funded prisons, to the executive order of “Ending Crime and Disorder on America’s Streets” that deploys the rhetoric of cure to justify the violence under the guise of providing “humanitarian” care. These effects may be further compound in Los Angeles with the 2028 Summer Olympics and Paralympics, displacing unhoused individuals and expose them to various matrices of incapacitation. All of this is painted with a sparkling veneer of constructing an accessible city, the brushstroke of violence of which is codified through the neoliberal separation between "inspirational" disabilities and the systemic production of injury. Simultaneously, Japan sees the election of Liberal Democratic Party leader Sanae Takaichi as the Prime Minister, who plans to revise Article 9 of the post-World War II constitution, which renounces Japan’s direct right to wage war. On the 80th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a mass disabling process, the Japanese government has refused to sign the United Nations’ Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons. In both Japan and the U.S., our cultural and material relationship to disability continues to shift.

I ask whether these moments will be, much like the unfolding of the “post-COVID” and “postwar” Japanese paradigms, pathologized through metaphors of injury and rehabilitation towards the normative demarcation of time before and after injury. In centralizing this idea of “post,” this project recognizes the persistent metonymics of disability within postwar Japan, and situates “post” as a rhetoric in which disability, injury, and trauma are implicated in what disability scholar Alison Kafer calls “curative time.” In her *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (2013), the term is used to identify how dominant forces control the temporal scaffolding between past, present, and future, shaping how time is synchronized to construct our reality as a border crossing from the archaic, othered, disabled past into the bright, allied, and able-bodied future. As a result, it disavows disability to (re)produce the linearity of normative time (Kafer

2013, 2–3). Kafer's cultural approach to disability, which examines disabled bodies as a part of this broader shaping of temporality, nation-building, and understandings of normativity, remains central to recognizing the historical and epistemological inscription of disability in postwar Japan and its institutional assemblage. As Rey Chow demonstrates in her historicization of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki within the geopolitical shift of economic power and knowledge production of "postwar Japan," these broader cultural imaginings are also embedded in our current demarcations and methodological undertakings of the time period (Chow 2005, 14).

I "map" out historical moments of injury to reveal the ways in which rhetorics of injury and cure have been deployed to frame "postwar Japan" not only in its contemporary moment but also in ways that structure Japan's placement within the global order. I first reconsider processes of injury within a Critical Disability Studies (CDS) framework, recasting injury in postwar Japan as a significant framework in the knowledge production of the "postwar." In seeing the interlocking ideologies that underlie such cases as *hibakusha* (atomic bomb victims), the Reischauer Incident, and the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics, I weave together a potential crip genealogy of postwar Japan as part of a multifaceted historical and historiographical inquiry into the entangled systems of injury. Though the analysis of how this manifests in the canonized rhetorics and racial and bodily imagery of postwar Japan is woven throughout, this epistemological examination will culminate in the fourth section, which reflects on the attitudes of the literature on the Independent Living Movement (ILM) in 1990s Japan. Positioning Japan as a "disability-friendly nation," the literature has mapped out a history that replicates the undergirding liberal ideology of disability present in the framing of the postwar (Kim 2011, 94).

Post- "posts": What is Afforded in the Metonymies of Injury?

Postwar Japan has often been pathologized and characterized by injury. The vocabulary of this period is embedded in the aesthetics, framing, and culture of injury, often prescribing the implications of injury and cure as transparently and universally undesirable to portray a future in which this "sickness" is overcome through the discipline and unification of the body or psyche (recalling the idea of the *yamato damashii* of imperial Japanese spirit). The systematic integration of this lexicon consequently resulted in the discourse of postwar Japan being arranged through these semiotics of injury and cure.

Perhaps the most immediate example is "postwar." What does it mean to punctuate time with the idea of post-mass-debilitating "event," and to definitively synchronize its subsequent aftermath? With the declaration of the "post-postwar" in the 1956 Economic White Paper, who is included in the collective corporeality structuring "post"? The definitive linguistic representation of the temporal, cultural, economic, and political distinction between the time of injury (both enacted and enacted upon) and the time of rehabilitation must be problematized in the uneven topographies of race, body, colonialism, and violence that it endemically attempts to conceal.

On this condition of "post," historian Lisa Yoneyama pointedly observes in the post-Cold War paradigm that while it signifies the epistemic *longue durée* of its condition, the lowercase use of the word suggests that the periodization is not afforded to the "West's rest." (Yoneyama 2016, xi). She evokes Allen Feldman's provocative problematization of the trauma narrative, as it presupposes the non-traumatized self before the event of trauma, flattening the textured topographies of both violence and the distribution of aftermath (Yoneyama 2016, 13). Feldman centrally poses, as crip scholars do, "What are the ramifications of fusing an ahistorical medicalized, psychoanalytic, therapeutic, or aesthetic concept to historiographic inquiry and narrative?...Trauma contravenes the homeostatic and the routine, and the recovery from trauma is implicitly posited as the return to a homeostasis of self and society" (Feldman 2004, 184–85). Indeed, what is so post about the postwar? Where the rehabilitative theme of temporal demarcation is grounded on the wartime debilitation of World War II, the post-postwar declaration is a calculated device alongside the politics of what is presumed in the one-time happening of injury, and how the ostensibly unified, pre-fabricated society overcomes it. Intertwined with state and private interests and the performativity of authority, the deployment of post also becomes tangled with what can be legibly (re)addressed or brought to the level of citizenship or human rights within these narratives of societal or national homeostasis.

As in the case of recent decolonial perspectives, the boundaries of citizenship and the "empirical" categorization of bodies are problematics foregrounded in CDS particularly in relation to injury's entanglement with the boundaries of the nation-state.[1] These lines are drawn through disabled bodies and rhetorics. Tari Young-Jung Na observes the intersection between colonial, racial, and curative paradigms on Zainichi Koreans with leprosy, who were imprisoned in postwar Japanese detention centers during mass repatriation.[2] Their sickness, intertwined with their racial incompatibility with Japan's ostensibly liberal postwar order, targeted and isolated them "through social perceptions of disease and infection, with the assumption that they 'impede' national development and other people's safety" (Chen et al. 2023, 68). In tandem with Japan's rehabilitation and integration into the U.S. Cold War democratization project, critical examinations of the intersections of race, colonialism, and injury reveal the ways in which curative rhetorics, steeped in exclusionary geopolitical borders contoured by the shadows of colonialism, are always in tension with the (in)capacitation of othered groups. To understand the curative rhetorics of postwar, it is crucial to locate them, utilizing a CDS framework that considers these intersections of becoming, as productive to one another.

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1 See Matsumura (2024), Roebuck (2025), Shin (2024), Yoneyama (2016), Jin (2021).

2 In addition to the colonial overtones, this also follows the isolation and containment of bodies with leprosy in Japan. See Burns (2019).

For example, Jasbir Puar's *The Right to Maim* (2017) provides a compelling framework in which to see the productive triangulation of capacitation, disability, and debility across settler-colonial sovereign states and colonial territories. Nirmala Erevelles (2011) addresses the important question of race in the material-discursive becomings of disability, utilizing it as an analytical framework to examine how it has organized the rhetorics and historical treatment of difference. Ruth Rogaski (2004) is also notable for her extensive historical account on Japan's modern hygiene projects in its colonies, outlining the intersections of surveillance, race, and sovereignty that bleed into the "postwar." These scholars' insights are critical in exploring the transnational and broader sociocultural and material implications of curative rhetorics in postwar Japan, which implicate the textured histories of race, nation, and modernity.

Further, the medicalization of disabled bodies by the social sciences parallels the move towards anthropology in area studies, which aided "American geopolitical investment and the post-independence nation-state building by observing people and their lives and rendering them into discretely identifiable and spatially fixed ethnonational categories" (Yoneyama 2016, 62). The divisions between the liberal disabled category of the Global North and the colonially or industrially debilitated category of the Global South compound this effect. It exacerbates the narrative of Japan as a mono-ethnic nation, its "miracle recovery" and supposed humanitarian treatment of its disabled citizens founded upon the self-evident recovery of the racially and bodily unified whole. In orienting this narrative within the temporal delineation of "posts," it remains a cornerstone to relegation of rich multi-ethnic and cultural presences and violent colonial histories to the distant past.

In obscuring this post-1945 continuation of colonial violence, the curative framing of U.S. intervention as "healthy" for the Pacific and liberating for the people of Asia (including the Japanese) is also indispensable (Yoneyama 2016, 83). This temporal dialect, which runs throughout the containment of disabled Zainichi Koreans and the American Occupation extending humanitarian aid to the Japanese subjugated by their own backward military, resembles Kafer's curative time. It is further scaffolded by the naturalization of the sovereign ethno-state and its right to maim uncivilized people into normative, global ideological and temporal configurations. The undeniable borders between the injured enemy and the rehabilitated ally that are produced as part of this narrative assembles America as a benevolent supremacist curing colonial and postcolonial worlds while obscuring the historicity in which injuries happen, by both American and Japanese military intervention. Without a critical excavation of the various strata and networks that exist in the rhetoric of cure and disability in the rendering of the discourse of "postwar Japan," they can be curative in their enunciation, curative in their use.

These systems are part of the rehabilitative rhetoric of the Cold War apparatus. It is important to map these rhetorics and processes of injury and cure as part of the conception of area studies through U.S.-Japanese collaboration, as the field began to emerge as a serious economic competitor on the global stage, and a bulwark against "Communist aggression in Korea" (Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002, 4). This ideology of rehabilitation is a pedagogical, intellectual project for the postcolonial paradigms of postwar Japan and East Asia, especially as U.S. and Japanese information systems began to re-emerge as imperative apparatuses for the reinscription of its colonial networks within this narrative of communist rehabilitation (Gerteis et al. 2020). The focus on the futurity produced by this curative dialect also functions to erase injury, instead celebrating its overcoming to veil the active contingencies in which it is propagated from U.S.-Japanese collaboration, and its integration into the global liberal, capitalist system. As both a perpetrator and a victim of curative violence, the construction of "Japan" presents an interesting case that warrants deeper exploration of how the themes of disability and cure that describe its postwar condition are part of this wider network of (in)capacitation.

Crip Genealogies

The scholars in *Crip Genealogies* (2023) situate genealogy as part of the production of normative scholarly habits of framework, inheritance, property, credit, and gatekeeping. In cripping dynamics in scholarly methodology, they define genealogy "through mappings of method; tracing how things are thought, how things are done," ultimately transforming the significance of disability within scholarly practice and scope (Chen et al. 2023, 12–19). I aim to emulate this disruption by mapping a new lexicon for approaching postwar Japan, with the sections of historical inquiry exploring how this emerging language could operate.

I work in concert with previous literature that has expanded the scholarly praxis of injury in Japan. Mark Bookman, for example, expands the canon of the disability rights movement in the 1970s into an examination of social networks created by the visually impaired elite, while scholars such as Lezlie Frye (*Crip Genealogies* 2023) have importantly expanded the historical scope of the disability rights movement by positioning race and racial labor in the historical and epistemological framing of the disability rights movement. This question of race is integral in the work of Naoko Wake, who has begun to integrate a disability framework into the question of racial hegemony in the nationalized narratives that structure the borders of *hibakusha*. Expanding these nationalized narratives, Lisa Yoneyama and Ran Zwigenberg engage with *hibakusha* as a culturally and institutionally productive category. Sawaragi Noi's *Sensō to Banpaku* (2005) has examined how these mass-debilitating events are rehearsed in national(ist) spectacles that perform Japan's rehabilitation. These tensions between injury and cure are also present in Janice Matsumura's investigation of the relationship between the Public Peace Law (the thought crime system) and the emerging field of psychiatry in 19th–20th century Imperial Japan. Frank Mondelli has taken up this question of disability through a similarly broad cultural approach in positioning the integral role of D/deaf people in the development and experimentation of auditory technology in 20th-21st century Japan. This emerging language is not limited to contemporary scholars, as those such as Yokota Hiroshi, a grassroots activist and poet from the 1970s disability rights movement, and artists Akamatsu Toshi and Iri, who produced *Genbaku no Zu* (*Map of Atomic Bombs*) (1950–1982), engage in identify-ing a broader network of injuries produced on an industrial and colonial level.

"Mapping" maintains an open format for intervention by other scholars, especially those who can provide crucial insights beyond the bounds of legibility in and outside of "Japan," as many of the above have. This is founded on the fundamental understanding of the limitations of a Japan-centric approach, engaging with its positionality in the dominance and standardization of North American institutions during the Cold War. My observations are by no means the beginning or the end.

Sites of Rehabilitation and Injury: The Edwin Reischauer Incident

In strategizing the role of the Emperor in the preemptive victory of the U.S. against Japan, Edwin Reischauer, diplomat to Japan who would later play a central role in U.S. postwar and Cold War policy in East Asia, wrote in his 1942 "Memorandum on Policy Towards Japan":

> The possible role of the Japanese Emperor in the post-war *rehabilitation of the Japanese mentality* has definite bearing upon the present situation. To keep the Emperor available as a valuable ally or puppet in the post-war ideological battle we must keep him *unsullied* by the present war (Reischauer 2022, 287–88).

This rehabilitation into a "healthy political and economic situation" is contingent on picturing the Emperor as separate from the fascism of Italy and Germany, as curable, presumed to be liberal, and potentially allied (Reischauer 2022, 287–88). Eujung Kim's framing of cure is useful here in situating this metaphor in the naturalized narratives of disability. She reminds us that colloquial sayings that are structured through images of war, such as "battling cancer," are founded on the idea that illness is an enemy, and the body itself is cast as an Other (Kim 2017, 14). The relationship that exists between (post)war and disability is two-fold, a reciprocal relation in which each buttresses the other in their conception of disability as the enemy, the conversion of which, utilizing a developmental dialect, constitutes a "healthy" rehabilitation into an ally. The tensions between cure and illness are articulated in this portrayal of interwar Japan as an "unhealthy," injured, enemy nation, and its preemptive future projection as an allied, peaceful, liberal, and rehabilitated nation for the mass-debilitating "post-war objectives" in Asia (Reischauer 2022, 287). Notably, this empirical surveillance of the "enemy body" standardized through the military history of area studies is also reflective of the hyper-surveillance of the sickly body.

Examining Reischauer's involvement in the 1965 memorandum on the Ryukyu Islands, this tension is also exemplified in Japan's role in relation to U.S. military violence in Vietnam, represented in the attempt to transform sites of tremendous colonial debilitation into symbols of spectacular recovery. In strategizing the Islands' role in the "military crisis" of communist influence spreading from Vietnam to Japan, the deployment of nuclear arms was proposed by both the LDP and American policymakers to convert Japan, in Reischauer's words, "from a cool but pleasant partner to a true ally" (Department of the Army 1965). The curative frameworks of the 1942 memorandum continue in the conversion of Japan and the preemptively imagined rehabilitation of Southeast Asia, normalizing this violent intervention as the sovereign's right to enact "humanitarian" aid.

This explicit border crossing that utilizes Okinawa as a geopolitical site of mediation for Southeast Asian debilitation is flanked by the Japanese state's collaboration with U.S. interests in Asia for economic rehabilitation—an aspect that would be performed on a global scale at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and the 1970 Osaka World Expo. Okinawa and Tokyo were certainly not the only sites into which this curative thread was being woven, as Hiroshima—similarly a postwar national site for mass debilitation for the tremendous industrial, technoscientific, and military resources it provided during World War II (veiled by the nationalized, affective image of atomic injury by the 1950s)—was being proposed as a site for nuclear power plants in 1955 while being reconstructed as a "bright" new city (Arima 2012, 15; Naono 2015, 80–83). To obtain such large amounts of uranium not native to Japan, it would require the mobilization of the Navajo people in Utah, leading to a high incidence of lung cancer (an effect agreed upon from studies conducted in Czechoslovakia, by the 1930s) (Brugge and Goble 2002, 1411–12).[3]

Reischauer would also become a corporeal site between cure and debilitation in March 1964, when he was critically injured by Shiotani Norikazu, a man purportedly with a history of mental institutionalization attempting to spread his message regarding the lack of treatment provided for nearsighted individuals. The debates over Shiotani's mental ability and political alignment became increasingly sensitive topics during the subsequent deliberations by the House of Representatives, especially as the Olympics steadily approached in October. The House, now supposedly at the definitive intersection between illness and criminality once more, proposed to increase police surveillance and to deliberate on how to deal with individuals with mental illness or with intellectual disabilities in order to recover Japan's international credibility. Reischauer would also suffer chronic complications from the blood transfusion he received after the incident, which exposed him to hepatitis C (Curry 2008).[4]

The backdrop of the lasting effects of the 1960s Anpo protests and the increasing anxieties of the international gaze leading up to the Olym-

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3 Outside of the U.S., the U.S. would have imported uranium from Canada, or the famous Shinkolobwe mine in Congo which would also provide uranium for the bombs dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

4 Postwar Japan has a contentious history with blood banks and "bought blood" caused by the lack of screening. The founder of the Nihon Blood Bank, Naitō Ryōichi was also the head of Unit 731, which prepared the country for the collection and distribution of blood for transfusions through his experiments on blood transfusion. During the pandemonium of the Reischauer incident, he would compare his company to *bakufu*, the warrior class of feudal Japan, to render the image that the company was organizing and ordering the blood system of Japan, but had to reform with the establishment of a new system under the rule of the divine Emperor. The organization would be renamed "Green Cross" to illustrate its peacefulness (Starr, 200-201). These illustrations represent the "liberalization" of imperial biomedical experimentation. See Holmberg (2015); and Starr (2000).

pics dovetails with the rising anxieties of communist proliferation, exemplified in the issue of Shiotani's political affiliation, a danger, which was augmented by the potentially pathological character of his mental deficiency. Some suggested a more standardized procedure for those with mental disabilities to institutionalize, provide vocational training, and reintegrating them into society ("work colonies"); some, reviving interwar and wartime techniques, suggested door-to-door visits to determine the criminality of individuals; and others determined if even one individual with mental disabilities were to compete in the Olympics, it would lead to something "catastrophic" (HoR 46th Session Social and Labor Affairs Committee 50 1964). "It would be against the Olympic spirit for people to be afraid of coming to Japan because there are mentally ill here" (HoR 26th Session Special Committee for Olympic Preparation No. 6 1964). These discussions reveal the sutures between the criminalization of mental disability that would justify increased police presence and the injury and displacement of political protesters, "vagrants," and "degenerates" produced by intensified policing—a form of surveillance that deployed curative rhetorics similar to those Reischauer would also deploy in his rehabilitative planning for injured Japan.

These deliberations occur at the cusp of increased police violence during the protests in the late 1960s, as the democratic right to protest was challenged through the extensive use of clubs, water cannons, and tear gas by the police (Marotti 2009, 102). The pathologization of protesters and others as mentally abnormal prodded at the capability of these protesters to access their rights as rational political subjects in the ostensibly democratic state. The invasive manner in which the House attempted to determine political and mental abnormalities in the collective body of the metropole also signaled the state's own rehabilitation from its irrational wartime past. The suggestions of surveillance and the bolstering of curative systems are also situated at a time when these pathologized protesters attempted to make legible the reinscription of Japan's colonial networks, one braided with the production of injuries and "mental abnormalities" of trauma as Vietnam, Korea, Burma, and the Ryukyu Islands experienced tremendous violence from the American rehabilitative democratic project. The discussions of productivity and normalization therefore must be located in this broader acknowledgment of the rhetorics of madness and cure, one which was galvanized through the turn towards psychological warfare by the U.S. (Zwigenberg 2023, 236–37).

Consider, finally, the emergence of modern standards in East Asian studies during this intense period of "globalization," and Reischauer's conception of these traditions at Harvard University. On the developmental dialect that circulates through this framework of linear progression Harry Harootunian notes that in the 1960s and 1970s, there was "a powerful intellectual consensus that was conceived that Japan had, in fact, avoided the route of revolutionary violence taken by societies like China and Russia precisely because of the mediating and ameliorating role it played by enduring values that could peacefully adapt to new exigencies" (Harootunian 2011, xiv). The mutual directionality of this belief in modernities that are "not quite modern" – the latent dialect of which creates what Kafer describes as a "one-way linear march 'upward'" from a disabled enemy into a healthy ally – molds East Asian studies into a colonial and imperial apparatus, one framed as empirical and social-scientific (Harootunian 2011, xiv; Kafer 2013, 53). The self-evident use of terms such as "rehabilitation" and "healthy," which work towards a deracialized, anachronistic, and depoliticized idea of disability and cure echoes a mission of colonial globalization that generalizes the Asia-Pacific region within the parameters of "friend or enemy, ally or adversary" (Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002, 246, 265).[5]

Bruce Cumings observes that many of these antisystemic movements in East Asia were categorized as manifestations of the immaturity and irrationality of the "political development" of their respective countries during the American crusade for liberal democratization in this era (Miyoshi and Harootunian 2002, 266). This framing deploys the naturalized narratives of developmental delay and illness to picture these move-

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[5] See Rogaski (2004) for an analysis on how these rhetorics are steeped in the modernization projects of Japan.

ments as signs of malignant growth. Indeed, during the attempt to build nuclear power plants in Hiroshima and allow Japan to host and produce nuclear weapons, protesters in the movement were characterized as having a "nuclear allergy" and an "emotional allergy" (Arase and Okuyasu 1968, 73–84). Observe also the instance of the forced removal and injury of protesters, unhoused individuals, and ethnic groups who were represented as signs of cultural and ideological degeneration [*shisōteki henshitsu*] through increased police presence during the Anpo protests and Tokyo's "Olympic fever" (Tomii 2002, 150–52). Injuring protesters who demanded recognition of the *longue durée* of injury is imperative to the curative process that disciplines bodies towards a unified national corporeality, and an even larger global system that signifies the healthy mind.

Contentious Placement of *Hibakusha* in Critical Disability Studies: Who is Enunciated?

Disability studies in Japan have emerged alongside many of the field's canonical texts in the 1980s-1990s, such as British sociologist Michael Oliver's *Social Work with Disabled People* (1983) and *The Politics of Disablement* (1990). They have produced a socially oriented method.[6] This entails the understanding that disability exists as a socially fabricated category, and is molded through dichotomies between "healthy" and "unhealthy" bodies. The approach is also rooted in the emerging concern for social justice and disability pride, rather than a limitation. This utopian framing omits the vectors of race and ethnicity, situating its understandings of gender, citizenship, capacitation, and disabled identity within the liberal politics of the "first world" or global North, where disability is framed as emerging not as a result of systemic violence, but as an occurrence of conception.

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[6] See Ishikawa and Nagase (1999) and Ishikawa et al. (2002).

Perhaps the "early" annunciation of disability studies in Japan compared with other regions of East Asia (1990s) also functions as a liberal symbol of intellectual and socioeconomic capacitation contoured by the intellectual and legislative approaches in the U.K. and U.S. Although I by no means argue that the contributors or disabled people in Japan intended to do harm by participating in the conception of disability studies and legal protection and support for disabled individuals (nor am I advocating for exceptionalism), I do find that the lack of engagement in the systems of capitalism, war, and racial histories as part of disability history or the history of colonial subjects is part of a larger sanitizing culture that produces knowledge of how we situate "disability" in historical inquiry.

Mirroring Puar's critique of the liberal centrism embedded in the naming of disability, Helen Meekosha's "scholarly colonialism" that is constituted in the erasure of Indigenous and Southern paradigms in the socially oriented approaches to disability is a useful framework for exploring the standardized approaches to injury in postwar Japanese history (Meekosha 2011, 667). The move away from the social justice approach and, further, what is considered in the realm of social justice as a historically discursive, liberal apparatus may present discrepancies in the conception of unified, liberal Japan and its colonial, academic compliance with the U.S.

Groups such as *hibakusha* constitute contentious categories in this landscape, as we must consider them in this genealogy while problematizing their nationalization and liberalized characterization—a presence which reframes the boundaries of disability topics, and the idea of "disability-friendly" Japan often deployed as a way of indicating its post-injury status and its "progress" from the necessity to historicize injury and cure overall. Puar's triangulation is useful here in understanding where it can be positioned in critically exploring the conceptualization of disability against the contours of colonial histories, namely the productive relationship between liberal enunciations of disability and the erasure of debilitation resultant from colonialism, occupation, and imperialism (Puar 2017, xvii).

There is, thus far, little scholarship that discusses *hibakusha* through a CDS lens, despite their optical encoding as figures of recovery in postwar Japan. The urgency of moving toward a CDS perspective is certainly emphasized by the fact that historically and historiographically, there has been a disengagement of the redress and peace movements incited by the Japanese *hibakusha* from the "threefold" realities of Korean Zainichi *hibakusha*. It remains a troubling exclusion when considering Hiroshima's role in facilitating colonialism during the war, where poor Zainichi individuals worked in Hiroshima's industrial settings, their bodies available to colonial, industrial, and atomic debilitation (Chull n.d.). Further, their medical care and historical recognition become entangled with the Cold War regime, stuck between the empires of Japan and the U.S (Jin 2021, Jin and Wake 2025). A deep exploration of their positionality within these intersections of violence delineates the borders of sovereignty, citizenship, and temporality, which is more than what I can provide here; however, this component of race is integral to the praxis of CDS in the historical inquiries of postwar Japan and injury moving forward (Shin 2025).

Historians such as Mizuno Hiromi have additionally indicated the need to integrate the history of technoscience into the discourse of nationalism in Japan. Her observations remind readers of the transnational networks of debilitation that are mutually productive with Japan's nationalistic representation of its rehabilitation. The lack of decolonization of this nationalized image of debilitation – though, as Yoneyama observes in *Hiroshima Traces*, there is a movement towards decolonial practices by *hibakusha* – seemed to be produced in part by the fixed liberal understandings of disability as separate from the colonial debility of and by Japan. This exceptionalism ("the only atomically bombed country") is, in part, produced by the machines of U.S.-Japanese imperialism and its knowledge production. The intentional cleavage between disability and debility is further compounded by the erasure of how these relations also exist in the dimension of Japan as a colonizer, its narrative positioning as a victim that has bolstered its reorganization of colonial networks during the Cold War.[7]

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[7] See Gerteis et al (2020).

The positive affective attachments produced by this centrality of the image of peace further fossilize *hibakusha* as single-axis and anachronistic figures moving "forward" towards a "healthy," "developed" understanding of social justice, rather than towards criticisms against colonial violence through collaboration with global *hibakush*a. Liberalism "orients and capacitates those disabled who can afford to be included" (Fritsch 2013, 143). As one of the sites that represent the simultaneous tensions between cure and injury, the American Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission, which medicalized the atomic body to study its effects rather than to treat it, has been transformed to the cancer centers currently operating to treat *hibakusha* (Radiation Effects Research Foundation 2025). These tensions reveal the colonial legacies that underlie the liberal portrayal of the national imagining of subjects and the erasure of others who fall outside this fixed conception and that are relegated to the background of the Global South.

For instance, when medical assistance from the U.S. was extended to the Hiroshima Maidens, who were *hibakusha* women with facial keloid scarring, the project, conceived by American and Japanese media, necessitated that those being treated were both Japanese and women. Affective responses to the prototypical reflection of "Japan" as a monocultural ethno-state and feminized former enemy characterized, in its ideological possibility for rehabilitation, the parameters of who is able to receive medical and humanitarian treatment. Eunjung Kim's perspectives on the "disability-friendly nation" also observes that the availability of cure and the affordance of being sheltered in post are inscribed through national and transnational interests, and vice versa. The disavowal of the developing nation in favor of the developed one takes on a normative temporal dialect, one that leverages the representation of the humanitarian rehabilitation of disabled bodies as a way of inscribing the division between history and its "post" (Kim 2011, 94).

A Hiroshima Maiden Niimoto Shigeko's publicized *Time* magazine photo reflects this temporal architecture: she was photographed topless, front and center, through a medicalized lens in her "before" photo, in contrast to her clothed three-fourths portrait. The caption "from horror to triumph" frames her photos. These ideological and visual renderings parse through the limitations of discussing social justice without deeper consideration of the entanglements of the conceptualization of the modern, "first world" nation state, and the consequent placement of disabled and debilitated images in the realization of those interests. In thinking about this moment as national imagery, we may problematize these conceptualizations—meant to incite affective responses to Japan's feminization and cure and the marvel for American technology after its destructive representation – through their foreclosure of possibilities for historical and cultural amendments for other nuclear subjects who fell outside fixed representation. These projects also occurred simultaneously with the violent interventions in Asia by the U.S., with the use of new technological regimes of warfare emerging alongside them. When viewed through the transnational implications of technoscientific and humanitarian framing, the boundaries of affective signification are clearly drawn through divisions of North and South, and ideological "health" relates to the ability to integrate into the global socioeconomic system.

Naoko Wake further complicates these elements in her study of the diasporic *hibakusha*, challenging the traditional ethnonational consensus on the category. Her analysis brings an integral decolonial lens in framing atomic debilitation within the framework of disability. Although her work undoubtedly represents a necessary shift in the field in recognizing the racialized dynamics of *hibakusha* and the incapacitation caused by nationalized imaginaries, the lack of deeper engagement with the network of capacitation, injury, and care fails to recognize the broader network of curative and debilitating systems, the contingencies of the transition from debilitated to disabled, and the severance of such categories that produce the liberal systems of redress. In her analysis, injury is a flattened category, operationally torn from broader cultural and ideological constructions. CDS address this, like Puar's open possibilities of resignification by positioning the broader curative rhetoric of Japan as a "disability-friendly nation" in productive tension with the incapacitation of groups that do not fit into the contours of citizenship, narratives of cure, affective response, and geopolitical demarcations.

Japan's Independent Living Movement: Liberal Circulation of Affect

Let us also take a look at how this articulation fits into the literature on the "canonical" topics of disability history in Japan and its relation to orienting itself in the global liberal order. The ILM has been portrayed as a continuation of the independence movements incited by grassroots groups such as *Aoi Shiba no Kai*, a group of activists and artists with cerebral palsy that kindled the social justice movement of disabled individuals by disabled individuals in the 1970s. The study by Hayashi Reiko (an anthropologist and sociologist) and Okuhira Masako (a disabled advocate who trains disabled individuals from so-called "developing nations") presents the difficulties and perhaps the scholarly colonialism embedded in the application and articulation of these liberalized images of disability (Deloitte Blog 2025).

The study outlines the history of disability activism and the ILM in Japan (from Berkeley, California) and Japan's role as a training ground for other disabled individuals from Asia. Its anthropological tone in the examination of the project itself is largely stripped of specific histories, economies, and colonial relations. This is particularly significant in relation to Japan's role as a colonizer during World War II and its Cold War re-establishment of industrial and pseudo-governmental networks in Asia, the legacies of which have actively continued to produce injury despite their "humanitarian" framing during the reparations movement.[8] Kuan-Hsing Chen's perspective on globalization as an "alibi that is used to erase history and politics" is constructive in framing this process of erasure as a temporal one (Chen 2010, 21). In the modernist rhetoric that is embedded in the upward, forward movement of globalization as the "healthy" route of progression that nations acquiesce to, Hayashi and Okuhira fix other countries in a state of perpetual delay, playing "catch-up" with charitable, first-world, "disability-friendly" Japan.

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[8] See Gerteis et al (2020).

Further, as Bookman notes in his own historical outline of disability activism in Japan and critiques of Hayashi and Okuhira's perspectives, this history obscures the complex domestic and international dynamics in the establishment of Independent Living Centers (ILCs) in Japan (Bookman 2024). Presenting a narrow vision of the history of disabled struggle and discrimination by these centers, this history functions in accordance with geopolitical borders and demarcations of the liberalized understanding of disability as requiring disabled people to become productive, rehabilitated, and successful citizens of a nation-state. The discussions of developing "work colonies" during deliberations on the Shiotani incident are indicative of this dominant framework that disabled activists attempted to break out of. Hayashi and Okuhira also omit the critiques that disabled activists articulated against the generalized application of the disability movement from the U.S. to Japan, thereby compounding dehistoricization through a completely horizontalized perspective. Such generalized applications were critiqued by disabled activists who had received training from U.S. activists at the time, pointing to the historical contingencies of unique disabled subjectivity in Japan (Bookman 2024; Isobe et al. 1983, 12–16).

The disabled trainees coming from other Asian countries are portrayed in a unified, generalized image of the disabled experience, notably without the political positioning and presence of these disabled voices apart from statements meant to elicit inspiration or positive affect. Historical and subjective differences are largely omitted, apart from individual cultural traits that similarly provide a positive affective response, either through their reinforcement of the sanitized image of disabled individuals in Japan, or through comedic instances which reproduce the racialized biases of the ostensibly underdeveloped Global South. Refuting disability as "becoming-in-the-world" or as a "historical event" for those who are Japanese or otherwise, Hayashi and Okuhira replicate the violence of portraying disabled individuals as such, normalizing the cultural and historical demarcation between disability and cure, productivity and unproductivity, disability and debility (Erevelles 2016, 26, 28). The erasure of Japan's legacy in facilitating mass debilitation in East and Southeast Asia directly or through its relationship to the U.S. also evades any process of accountability for the production of injury, reinforcing the "post"s of Japan as isolated entirely within the confines of the postwar image of the unified nation-state.

The director of an ILC program further professed his anger towards the "former trainees with minor impairments" who use the program on their résumés to get a job outside of the ILM: "We'll only support only those who are serious about the IL movement from now on—those with severe impairments who cannot live without the IL movement" (Hayashi and Okuhira 2008, 423). The absence of critical pushback against the historical, colonial, and cultural biases that underscore this statement, coupled with the lack of historical nuance, reveals the authors' representation of Japan as an anachronistically developed, progressive, and charitable nation equal to the dominant global powers of the Global North. The possibilities of exploring disability as historically discursive, as cultural, and as political are foreclosed in the approach that resembles many of the colonial practices of both interwar and postwar Japan and area studies that seek to "observe" and extract information from a subject to determine its utility in shaping global relations, liberal signs, and symbols of the post-postwar.

Performing the Post-Postwar: 1964 Tokyo Games

It is important to situate these historical becomings of injury and their narrative framing in moments of national(istic) pronouncement. Positive affect has encoded the ways in which disability history in Japan has been outlined, assembling the individualization, privatization, and nationalization of the normalized borders and narrative compositions of injury. This architecture manifests in instances that may, at first glance, have nothing to do with disability. Novelist Mishima Yukio's report on the women's volleyball game during the 1964 Tokyo Olympics exemplifies this proliferation of affective responses that reinforce the naturalized representations of what disability is and how it is recounted, imaged, and digested.

The triumph of the women's spirit over their bodily pain and exhaustion incites this response from the conservative, ultra-macho writer: "She cried, I cried," recalling the victory through metaphors of war and the logic of enemies and allies (Mishima 2019, 47).

In addition to the rise of the ethnonationalist Olympic spirit that underlies these statements, the affective response to overcoming the limitation of the body and psyche through the strength of the spirit (rendering the body as enemy and as Other) remains integral to the (re)production of the architecture of liberal curative dialects. Mishima frames the response to the Games through a transparent desire to overcome cultural illness, for which the Olympics provided a powerful antidote: "Though the critics of the Olympics have their own logic and concerns, upon seeing the stadium today, I candidly understood one thing: 'I am glad we could all do this. If we didn't, we Japanese would become ill'" (Mishima 2019, 18).

The Emperor, who publicly endorsed and facilitated these curative processes during the interwar and wartime periods, was certainly not absent from the 1964 Games, with the Crown Prince and Princess primarily facilitating the Paralympics (Johnson 1995, 232–3; Ward 2019, 183). Reflecting Mishima's sentiments, the Prince emphasized the participants' "return to society," in fact one of the primary goals of the Paralympics, along with the increased social awareness of disabled individuals (Frost 2022, 40). Despite this veneer, imperial presence functioned to carefully cultivate the "highly politicized link designed to benefit the Games and the international reputation of Japan's future monarch... promoting the new postwar Japan's commitment to peace and international goodwill" (Frost 2022, 50).

Drawing on Max Ward's work on thought criminality in interwar and wartime Japan, which he notes bled into the postwar refiguring, we can see the emperor's public presence as supervisory over criminal and medical rehabilitation (Ward 2019, 183). "Thought war," during the increasing mobilization of citizens and reformers to fight in the ideological battle against the "disease of communism," shows the sustained relationship between public spectacle, rehabilitative dialects, and the emperor as a paternalistic facilitator of cure within the postwar landscape (Ward 2015, 414–16). The public spectacle of imperial rehabilitation is further located in the issue of vagrants who threatened the state's imagining of the linear recovery from its imperial past. Indeed, these sentiments were prodded by the media, which likened the state's feverish efforts for the Olympics to a *seisen* (holy war) (Igarashi 2000, 143).

We may also observe how these rhetorics served to portray Japan as an emerging welfare state, and an ally to the global order with crip-nationalist events like the Paralympics. Eunjung Kim's critical analysis of these events outlines the relationship between the positive image of a nation through its hyper-visualization of the abled-disabled body (to use Tanya Titchkosky's words) and the national projects of "first world" imagining. This was certainly true for the 1964 Tokyo Paralympics, which strategically functioned to "produce hierarchies between different societies and nations," as the television broadcast reinforced the Japanese athletes' destitute situation compared to the "bright" smiles of the foreign white athletes (Kim 2011, 95; Frost 2022, 40–41). In the push towards the liberalization and modernization of Japan through the collaboration of Japanese and American elites, this pejorative portrayal demonstrates a pedagogical moment where the disabled athletes of Japan would be valued only in their role in the state's performance as an emerging welfare state, with the potential to join the ranks of first-class nations. These athletes' brief capacitation was only contingent on this national performance, as Tokyo, even in its supposed dedication towards these social issues through the contrast between Japanese and foreign athletes, remained as inaccessible as ever (Frost 2022, 32–33).

These effects compound with the intentions of providing care for disabled individuals on the global stage, the publicity of which is "inevitably related to foreign policy and the funding agencies' political interests. Power dynamics between recipients and providers of help, their national representations, and the symbolic value of bodily transformation through medicine contribute to the hierarchy between cultures and positioning of enabled bodies over disabled bodies" (Kim 2011, 95). The construction of the "disability-friendly" nation that aligns with the social justice and rights-based picturing of disability of liberal first-world countries galvanizes the institutional relationship of the U.S.-Japan empire, and availability for culturally, economically, and politically capacitative opportunities for Japan. Capacitation is central in how the circulation of affects cannot only affix the consensus of disability (and its erasure and/or relationship to colonial debility), but further, how these liberal technologies can, in turn, bolster a nation's own healthy positioning in the global order.

Conclusion

My hope is that these examples illustrate the necessity to expand the praxis of postwar Japanese history and approaches to historical inquiries into injury, and further, to demonstrate that disability and curative rhetorics are transmitted historically and contemporarily in cultural and academic production. We may return to the Shiotani incident to understand the material discursivity of this event in the rendering of mental illness as a result of the liberalization and nationalist undertones during the Olympics, and the authoring of the sovereign nation-state by the work of area studies. Or, consider the tensions between rehabilitation and (in)capacitation that played out in the theater of Hiroshima and beyond the space-time of the "event" of atomic debilitation. Further, how can we understand the curative genealogy of the liberal, "disability-friendly" image of a nation that attempts to erase its injured past through events such as the Olympics and Paralympics and peaceful portrayal of *hibakusha* within the Cold War rehabilitative politics of area studies? In the presumption of American liberalism and democracy that performs curative time in Japanese studies, how may this reciprocally contour the borders of how we enunciate and articulate disability in the "post" of postwar, the "post" of debilitated life after it? Mapping these processes alongside one another as productive of broader curative and (in)capacitating networks must also be positioned in the intellectual positioning of the Cold War rehabilitation project.

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Book Review

Book Review of
A Maritime Vietnam: From Earliest Times to the Nineteenth Century

Yoshihiro TAGA

(Reviewed Book)

A Maritime Vietnam: From Earliest Times to the Nineteenth Century.
By Li Tana. Cambridge University Press, 2024. 354pages.
ISBN 9781009237628

Book Review of
Architects of Occupation: American Experts and Planning for Postwar Japan

Jaeik AHN

(Reviewed Book)

Architects of Occupation: American Experts and Planning for Postwar Japan.
By Dayna L. Barnes. Cornell University Press, 2017. 240 pages.
ISBN 9781501707834.

Book Review of
The Translocal Island of Okinawa: Anti-Base Activism and Grassroots Regionalism

Sinhyeok JUNG

(Reviewed Book)

The Translocal Island of Okinawa: Anti-Base Activism and Grassroots Regionalism.
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Li Tana has long been at the forefront of efforts to reassess Vietnamese history, which has traditionally been framed in agrarian, rural, and Confucian terms. Since the publication of her first monograph, *Nguyễn Cochinchina* (Li 1998), she has consistently advanced a maritime-oriented reinterpretation of the Vietnamese past. This perspective was further developed in her subsequent co-edited volumes, *Water Frontier* (Li and Cooke 2006) and *The Tongking Gulf through History* (Cooke, Li, and Anderson 2011). Her most recent work, *A Maritime Vietnam: From Earliest Times to the Nineteenth Century,* brings this sustained line of inquiry to a new level of synthesis. Comprising ten chapters, the volume offers a wide-ranging reinterpretation of Vietnamese history from prehistory to the early nineteenth century, with a particular focus on the transregional circulation of people, goods, and ideas across maritime spaces.

Chapters 1 through 3 revisit the period from prehistory to the eighth century through a maritime lens. Li traces how northern Vietnam, incorporated into the Han Empire as Jiaozhi in the second century BCE, developed into one of the empire's principal southern emporia. From the third century onward, its prosperity was closely tied to connections with India. During this period, Jiaozhi emerged also as a major center of Buddhism, serving as a hub for the movement of monks between India and China. At the same time, as the spread of Buddhism in China stimulated demand for aromatics, Jiaozhi came to serve a dual role as both a production center and a transshipment hub. As Jiaozhi became a cosmopolitan node within the Chinese imperial world, Linyi in central Vietnam was also developing into a commercial polity. Having gained independence from China in the second century, it functioned as an intermediary port in Sino-Indian trade and became a significant supplier of aromatics to China.

Northern Vietnam gained independence from Chinese rule in the tenth century. The Lý dynasty, established in 1009, built its capital at Thăng Long (present-day Hanoi), a nodal point within the Red River's fluvial network. Chapter 4 examines the role of maritime networks in the formation of the Lý dynasty and in the subsequent rise of the Trần dynasty. For the Lý-Trần period of Đại Việt, the significance of the sea became increasingly visible from the twelfth century onward, as commercial activity expanded along the eastern littoral of the Red River delta. The establishment of the Southern Song dynasty and the growing demand for Yunnanese horses, combined with the export of private salt from Vietnam, stimulated the expansion of trade across the Jiaozhi Sea. Against this backdrop, the Trần clan, whose origins lay among migrants from Fujian, emerged as a leading force among the newly ascendant coastal powers. The Trần clan ultimately established a new dynasty in 1225.

Chapters 5 and 6 underscore the significance of Muslim commercial networks in the development of the Jiaozhi Sea trade. The expansion of Islamic trade first stimulated the growth of Champa, whose ports became major entrepôts for Sino-Arab maritime trade from the eighth century onward. Muslim merchants played important roles not only in commerce but also in the political and diplomatic affairs of the Cham court. Through Champa, these networks also influenced Đại Việt. Cham Muslims operating via Hainan Island facilitated trade between Đại Việt and China and contributed to the island's development as a center for aromatic production. Li further identifies fifteenth-century ceramic production in northern Vietnam under the Lê dynasty as evidence of integration into wider Muslim trading circuits. For instance, Đại Việt blue-and-white ceramics circulated widely across Island Southeast Asia, including Java, through networks in which Cham intermediaries played a central role. This longstanding link between Đại Việt and the Islamic world was severed by Lê Thánh Tông's campaign against Champa in 1471.

Southeast Asia experienced a major commercial expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, often described as the 'Age of Commerce.' Chapter 7 examines the impact of this maritime boom on the Tonkin region (northern Vietnam). In the seventeenth century, Tonkin attracted merchants from Japan, China, Portugal, the Netherlands, and England, as it emerged as an alternative supplier of raw silk amid the disruptions accompanying the Ming–Qing transition. In exchange for silk exports, large quantities of foreign currencies flowed into Tonkin in the form of silver and cash coins. According to Li, the massive inflow of foreign currencies had four major consequences for seventeenth-century Tonkin society: a construction boom, the densification of market networks, the rise of *đình* as religious institutions supporting village communities, and an increase in the circulation of Chinese books alongside the formation of village literati. Li argues that this commercial basis facilitated the formation of a "traditional" social order in early modern Vietnam and that rural and maritime elements in the Vietnamese society were not mutually opposed but closely interconnected.

While seventeenth-century Tonkin underwent major social change during the commercial boom, the Nguyễn lords in Cochinchina of southern Vietnam built on the legacy of Champa to develop new forms of political and economic organization. Chapters 8 and 9 trace the rise and fall of the Nguyễn regime as a maritime entity over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the seventeenth century, Cochinchina emerged as a key hub in the triangular trade linking Japan, China, and Southeast Asia. It not only functioned as an entrepôt for goods from across the region, but also attracted numerous merchant vessels as a major source of forest products, notably calambac. Despite challenges such as Japan's seclusion policy and instability in South China, the Nguyễn authorities sustained their position through maritime ties with the Zheng regime in Taiwan.

As Anthony Reid's "Chinese Century" thesis suggests, eighteenth-century Southeast Asia entered a new phase of economic growth closely linked to the expansion of the Chinese economy. In Cochinchina, this development centered on the "water frontier" stretching from the Mekong Delta to the Gulf of Siam. Li situates the prosperity of this frontier within the context of the Canton trade. That is, Hong merchants, in collaboration with European commercial capitals, expanded their trade with Southeast Asia, with Cochinchina emerging as a key partner. Against this backdrop, Cochinchina developed export commodities such as rice, pepper, and sugar. Its rice exports were closely tied to tin production in Bangka Island, forming part of intra-Asian trade centered on Canton, which also fostered the rise of Cancao (Hà Tiên) as a new entrepôt in the Gulf of Siam world. However, this prosperity began to decline after peaking in the 1760s. Monetary disorder caused by the private minting of zinc cash, the sharp appreciation of gold, and heavy taxation on forest products such as rattan generated widespread discontent under Nguyễn rule, culminating in the Tây Sơn rebellion of 1771. Li emphasizes that during the ensuing three decades of civil war, cities such as Biên Hòa, Mỹ Tho, and Hội An were severely damaged by the Tây Sơn plundering. Their hostility toward the Chinese merchant community led to an outflow of Chinese merchants, dealing a major blow to Cochinchina's commercial economy.

The concluding Chapter 10 examines the relationship between state integration under the nineteenth-century Nguyễn dynasty and maritime transport. Drawing on Victor Lieberman's *Strange Parallels* framework, Li analyzes the state-organized grain transport system (tảo vận) as an instrument of integration between northern and southern Vietnam. According to Li, northern Vietnam bore a heavy burden of rice provision under this system in order to sustain the population of the capital Huế in central Vietnam. By contrast, the burden imposed on southern Vietnam was minimal, which Li interprets as a preferential policy toward the south under Emperor Gia Long (r. 1802–1820). Grain transport by sea took place during the typhoon season, making it a highly risky undertaking. Moreover, unlike the Qing grain transport system, the Nguyễn system did not generate significant flows of commercial wealth and thus played only a limited role in integrating the national economy. In addition, the global economic downturn in the early nineteenth century, triggered by declining silver supplies from Latin America following the Mexican War of Independence, posed further challenges to Nguyễn state-building efforts. In conclusion, Li argues that the grain transport system represented an economic expression of southern regionalism within the Nguyễn polity, and that the dynasty ultimately failed to achieve the level of territorial integration seen in Siam and Burma.

One of the most striking features of Li's work is its exceptionally wide range of sources illustrating the Vietnamese maritime trade networks and their non-state actors. Li draws not only on official dynastic records from both Vietnam and China but also on Buddhist texts, works on flora and fauna, and epigraphic materials. For the period after the seventeenth century, she further incorporates Japanese and European sources. By combining these textual materials with archaeological evidence, Li reconstructs the maritime connections of premodern Vietnam with remarkable clarity. Equally noteworthy is her engagement with scholarship beyond the Anglophone world. Through her work, readers gain access to a broader body of research produced in Vietnamese, Japanese, and Chinese.

Another defining feature of Li's work is its use of commodities as a means of understanding Vietnam's connections with the maritime world. These include a wide range of goods circulating across Asian seas, such as aromatics, salt, cobalt, copper, ceramics, silk, books, sugar, tin, rattan, zinc, and rice. By tracing the movement of these commodities, Li successfully links the sea with the uplands and the rural with the urban, while situating Vietnam within broader Asian and global histories. Since the 2010s, several attempts to write a comprehensive history of Vietnam have been made in the Anglophone academia (Taylor 2013; Goscha 2016; Kiernan 2017). Li's book—though focused on the premodern period—stands out among them as an innovative attempt to reconstruct Vietnamese history through chains of commodities and the activities of non-state actors.

One of the more controversial aspects of Li's work is her assessment of the eighteenth-century Tây Sơn regime and the nineteenth-century Nguyễn dynasty from a maritime perspective, both of which are portrayed in somewhat negative terms. Here, I focus primarily on the latter. In her book, the relationship between the Nguyễn dynasty and the maritime world is examined chiefly through the grain transport system, with particular attention to the reign of Emperor Gia Long. This approach results in a largely negative portrayal, in which state-led maritime transport is seen as contributing little to Vietnamese national integration.[1] If the analytical scope were broadened and the chronological framework ex-

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[1] While Li identifies the navy as the principal agent of the Nguyễn dynasty's grain transport system, in its early phase, merchant vessels mobilized from coastal villages in central Vietnam, including Cảnh Dương and Lý Hòa, also played a significant role. For example, see *Đại Nam thực lục chính biên đệ nhất kỷ* [Primary compilation of the veritable record of Đại Nam, First Reign] (The Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, Keio University, 1963, 1968), vol. 26, 20b–21a.

tended to encompass the reigns of Gia Long's successors, such as Emperors Minh Mạng (r. 1820–41), Thiệu Trị (r. 1841–47), and Tự Đức (r. 1847–83) it would remain an open question as to how the Nguyễn dynasty's engagement with the sea might be reinterpreted.

Long criticized in Vietnam under a Marxist historiographical framework as a "feudal reactionary regime," the Nguyễn dynasty has recently undergone extensive reassessment, in parallel with the growing availability of archival sources, including the vast corpus of palace documents (*Châu bản triều Nguyễn*).[2] For example, Đỗ Bang's monograph, a pioneering study of Nguyễn commercial policy, argues that the dynasty maintained a relatively open stance toward maritime trade and that the so-called closed-door (bế quan tỏa cảng) policy did not in fact exist (Đỗ Bang 1997, 40–44); Li herself was among the first scholars to advance similar revisionist interpretations (Li 1995). For understanding the Nguyễn dynasty's maritime orientation, studies by Chen Chingho and Claudine Salmon are also instructive, as they show that the Huế court dispatched official ships to Batavia, Singapore, and even Bengal for purposes of trade and intelligence gathering (Chen 1990; Salmon 1999; Salmon 2013).[3] It should also be noted that Chinese merchants, who had long served as intermediaries linking Vietnam with the maritime world, remained active under Nguyễn rule. Guild halls for Cantonese and Fujianese merchants were established in Hanoi, and these groups were closely involved in state finance through activities such as coin minting and tax farming (Taga 2022, 42–46). At the same time, the Huế court frequently entrusted them with the procurement of Chinese goods on the Canton market (Taga 2023, 23–25). Recent studies have also revisited sugar exports in Vietnam under the Nguyễn dynasty—described by Li as having declined relative to the eighteenth century—drawing on archival materials from the Huế court and statistical data from Singapore (Taga

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[2] For the reassessment of the Nguyễn dynasty that has gained momentum in Vietnam since the 1990s, see Lockhart 2001.

[3] For the relationship between the Nguyễn dynasty and Singapore in particular, see also Cao Thi Van 2021.

2023, 37–41; Cao Thi Van and Ninh Thi Sinh 2025). Over the past decades, Vietnamese scholars have increasingly focused on the dynasty's substantial efforts in coastal defense, and a growing body of research—while somewhat imbued with a political tone—has emerged on this topic (Đỗ Bang 2015; Lê Tiến Công 2016). Finally, as Li observes, silver circulation is a key issue in understanding Vietnam's entanglement with the maritime Asian economy. From this perspective, greater attention might have been given to the Nguyễn dynasty's monetary policy, particularly its active promotion of silver currency and the marked expansion in the circulation of foreign silver dollars in early nineteenth-century Vietnam (Taga 2021). Rather than constituting shortcomings, these points highlight the rich possibilities that Li's work opens up for future research. As such, her work stands as a landmark in Vietnamese historiography and is essential reading for all scholars interested in the field.

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[Book Review]
Architects of Occupation:
American Experts and Planning for Postwar Japan

Jaeik AHN

Reviewed Book

Architects of Occupation: American Experts and Planning for Postwar Japan
By Dayna L. Barnes. Cornell University Press, 2017. 240 pages.
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Introduction

In recent years, China has sought to introduce new interpretations of the end of the Asia-Pacific War and the postwar settlement process. For example, in August 2025, commemorating the 80th anniversary of Japan's surrender, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that "Taiwan's return to China was a result of the victory in World War II and an integral part of the postwar international order. A series of documents with international legal effect, including the Cairo Declaration, the Potsdam Declaration, and the terms of Japan's surrender, confirmed China's sovereignty over Taiwan. The historical and legal fact that Taiwan belongs to China is beyond dispute." What stands out here is China's endorsement of the Cairo and Potsdam Declarations—joint statements agreed upon by the United States, Britain, China, and the Soviet Union during the wartime period. Yet this position directly contradicts China's complete rejection of the San Francisco Peace Treaty, which it describes as "an illegal and invalid document produced by the United States after the war, when it assembled a handful of countries to conclude a separate peace with Japan while excluding the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union." This selectiveness illustrates how China seeks to interpret historical events in ways that support its contemporary political objectives—particularly regarding sensitive regional issues such as Taiwan and Japan's remilitarization.[1]

Against this backdrop, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at what the end of the Asia-Pacific War actually looked like in practice. I have previously examined a study that traces the process leading to the conclusion of the San Francisco Peace Treaty (the Peace Treaty with Japan) (Ahn 2025). Building on that, exploring how the U.S. government and

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1 For the statements of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in this paragraph, see "Waijiaobu: suowei "Jiujinshan heyue" feifa wuxiao, Taiwan shuyu Zhongguo de lishi he fali shishi burong zhiyi" [Ministry of Foreign Affairs: The So-Called 'San Francisco Peace Treaty' Is Illegal and Invalid, the Historical and Legal Fact That Taiwan Belongs to China Is Unquestionable]. *People's Daily Online*, August 18, 2025. https://world.people.com.cn/n1/2025/0818/c1002-40544961.html.

civilian experts—while the Second World War was still underway—envisioned a stable postwar order in East Asia and how they sought to translate those ideas into concrete plans, not only deepens our understanding of the foundations and historical development of today's regional order but also offers insight into ongoing China–Japan disputes over history and territory. Dayna L. Barnes's book under review, *Architects of Occupation: American Experts and the Planning for Postwar Japan*, speaks directly to these concerns.

Book Overview

The book is organized into an introduction, six main chapters, and a conclusion. The main purpose is to explain in detail the American reforms deemed necessary to transform Japan—once an enemy state—into a future ally. In the introduction, Barnes writes: "Between 1939 and 1945, American policymakers decided to reorient rather than punish postwar Japan. They hoped to transform the current enemy into a 'responsible' international actor through a short American-led military occupation" (p. 2). The author emphasizes that Americans had begun envisioning the shape of the postwar world even before the attack on Pearl Harbor, and that U.S. occupation policy toward Japan emerged only after years of planning and preparation.

In Chapter 1, the author examines President Franklin D. Roosevelt's approach to foreign-policy decision-making. She argues that Roosevelt often sidelined the views of official State Department experts and instead relied on personal envoys and informal channels of information. She notes:

> President Roosevelt showed little interest in the work of official experts working on postwar issues, preferring to find analysis from outside official channels. As a result, planners sometimes worked in a vacuum, without a voice in wartime agreements and uncertain of their president's plans. Had he lived to see Japan's surrender, FDR might have rejected

the recommendations of his planners." (p. 29)

This passage summarizes the author's portrayal of Roosevelt as largely indifferent to the perspectives of policy planners, bureaucrats, and other formal expert groups. The author also characterizes the wartime president as someone whose attention was directed far more toward European affairs than toward the Far East.

In Chapter 2, Barnes turns to a group of experts in the State Department that formed the so-called "Japan crowd," such as Joseph C. Grew, Eugene Dooman, and Joseph Ballantine. Notably, their approach diverged sharply from the president's hard-line stance. For example, in July 1943, the Territorial Subcommittee of the Postwar Programs Committee (PWC) stated that "the ultimate objective of the United Nations is to restore Japan to full and equal membership in a family of nations bound together by an international organization and protected by an effective security system" (p. 34). The author highlights this as evidence that these policymakers saw the restoration of Japan as a normal state and its reintegration into the international community as a central policy goal. Although such views had limited influence during Roosevelt's presidency, the author notes that the situation changed after Roosevelt's death in early 1945 and the succession of Harry Truman to the presidency (p. 36).

In Chapter 3, the author shifts attention to the role of private-sector experts, particularly those associated with the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) and the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR). She explains that the U.S. government relied heavily on these civilian expert groups during the war. As she notes, "During World War II, officials had to lean particularly hard on the IPR, the only expert group focusing on Pacific affairs, because the potential pool of specialists was so shallow and the level of common knowledge so low" (p. 62). According to the author, these think tanks played a significant role in shaping and refining the State Department's policy objective—discussed in Chapter 2—of restoring Japan as a functioning member of the international community after the war.

In Chapter 4, the author highlights how this "conciliatory approach toward Japan" clashed with the strongly pro-China sentiment that dominated American public opinion at the time. She points out that several prominent figures sought to counter the prevailing hard-line mood and to argue that easing hostility toward Japan, granting it a degree of postwar economic stability, and ultimately reintegrating it as a responsible member of the international community aligned with U.S. national interests. Among those who advanced such arguments, Barnes cites Joseph Grew, Walter Lippmann, Henry R. Luce, and several authors of essays published through the IPR.

In Chapter 5, the author provides a detailed account of how congressional views on foreign policy shifted over time. She pays particular attention to the impact of the Pearl Harbor attack, noting that it significantly weakened the strong isolationist sentiment that had prevailed in Congress:

> [E]ven before Pearl Harbor, support for isolationism was weakening as events in Europe made it clear that America's allies faced a real threat of defeat without its support. The Japanese attack and declaration of war shocked the nation and permanently undermined the argument that geography could insulate America from foreign threats. (p. 123)

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Congress began to move away from isolationism and toward a more active international role. This shift eventually produced concrete outcomes. The author notes that "The House and Senate debated bipartisan resolutions between spring and fall 1943 on the necessity of an international organization for peace and American membership in such an organization." (pp. 132–33) The author further observes that Congress gradually came to support policies aimed at helping Japan reestablish itself as a normal state in the postwar period. She points to statements by lawmakers such as Walter Judd, Howard McMurray, and Burton Wheeler as evidence of this emerging consensus.

In the final chapter, Chapter 6, the author examines how U.S. policy toward the postwar Far East took shape after President Roosevelt's death and the succession of President Harry Truman. Unlike Roosevelt, who had relied heavily on personal advisers and informal channels, Truman drew actively on the recommendations of formal bureaucratic bodies that favored a conciliatory approach toward Japan and sought its reintegration into the international community. According to the author, it was this shift that ultimately enabled the implementation of the occupation policies we now recognize as the foundation of the postwar U.S. approach to Japan.

Debates over the Role of Civilian Experts

As discussed above, Barnes argues that private think tanks, such as the CFR and the IPR, and the civilian experts involved in these organizations exerted significant influence on the State Department, Congress, and broader public opinion. Ultimately, she contends, their advocacy of a policy aimed at restoring Japan as a normal state was adopted by President Truman and implemented as the actual U.S. occupation policy toward Japan (Janssens 1995).

Writing roughly twenty years before Barnes, Rudolf V. A. Janssens, who also examined the formation of postwar U.S. occupation policy toward Japan, offered a somewhat different interpretation. Janssens also examined the views of civilian experts on the Far East. He identified sixteen documents frequently cited by the State Department and other government agencies involved in postwar planning and analyzed their main arguments. He found broad agreement on three points: that (1) Japanese society differed fundamentally from Western societies, that (2) prewar Japan had been characterized by strong militaristic tendencies, and that (3) meaningful change within Japan was essential for establishing a stable postwar peace (Janssens 1995, Ch. 4). These findings do not contradict what Barnes later discloses: namely, that many civilian experts argued for Japan's reintegration into the international community after the war. However, Janssens highlighted two important complications. First, the experts he examined were divided over whether Japan could truly carry out the kind of fundamental reforms envisioned along Western lines. Second, although they agreed that postwar transformation in Japan was crucial for global peace, they did not clearly articulate what specific forms that transformation should take. In other words, Janssens showed that Far Eastern specialists at the time operated within clear limitations.

Janssens also pointed out that policy planners within the State Department held divergent views on postwar policy toward the Far East, and that the War Department, the Navy Department, and their affiliated agencies, such as the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and the Office of War Information (OWI), had to devise and implement plans for the occupation of Japan with information even more limited than what the State Department possessed (Janssens 1995, Chs. 5–7). In short, the civilian experts lacked sufficient knowledge and data on Japan, and their opinions were far from unified; similar constraints existed within government bodies such as the State, War, and Navy Departments. For this reason, Janssens argued that "Even though State Department planners had worked on policies for postwar Japan since the beginning of 1942, the basic policy still had to be formulated at the end of the war." The various planning efforts undertaken during the war, he concluded, never cohered into a single, well-defined policy, and thus "seemed not a very efficient way to plan for the postwar policies."

Viewed from this perspective, one question arises: to what extent did the knowledge and information that American scholars possessed about prewar Japanese society actually shape the planning and implementation of the postwar occupation policy? As noted earlier, Barnes argues that the views of civilian experts were transmitted to State Department officials and, ultimately, to President Truman, and that these ideas were directly reflected in the occupation policies adopted after the war. Janssens, however, stresses the limitations of these civilian experts and points out that confusion over Far Eastern policy existed not only among them but also within government institutions such as the State, War, and Navy Departments. He emphasizes that this confusion persisted right up to the end of the war and was never fully resolved. If we follow Janssens's interpretation, the extent to which civilian expertise actually shaped the occupation policy becomes far less certain.

Given the divergence between these two scholars' interpretations, it becomes clear that further research is needed to determine the extent to which the views of American civilian experts on the Far East in the 1930s and 1940s actually shaped the formation and implementation of the occupation policy toward Japan.

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[Book Review]

The Translocal Island of Okinawa: Anti-Base Activism and Grassroots Regionalism

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Reviewed Book

The Translocal Island of Okinawa: Anti-Base Activism and Grassroots Regionalism.
By Shinnosuke Takahashi. Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. 192 pages.
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Shinnosuke Takahashi's *The Translocal Island of Okinawa: Anti-Base Activism and Grassroots Regionalism* is a welcome addition to recent Anglophone scholarship on the transnational networks connecting Okinawa to the broader Asia-Pacific region. Challenging the conventional understanding of Okinawan anti-base resistance as a monolithic or ethnocentric movement, Takahashi reinterprets (anti-)base politics and activism in Okinawa as a manifestation of "translocality" and "grassroots regionalism," defined by fluid, cross-border networking and ideological solidarity on multiple scales. As Takahashi states at the outset, this book "is a project to recuperate our social imagination on Okinawa's anti-base politics in light of anti-colonial/anti-imperial struggles in the context of Japan, East Asia and beyond" (p. 7). By framing Okinawan identity as an active process of "becoming," he seeks to situate Okinawa, as well as Okinawan studies, in broader contexts beyond national boundaries.

Organized around the book's central question—"how has grassroots regionalism been playing a constitutive part in the enactment of local activism?" (p. 17)—the book's seven chapters address a range of topics. In chapter 1, "Imagining the Islands Against the Grain," which serves as the introduction, Takahashi establishes the historical and conceptual framework for understanding Okinawa's anti-base movement, challenging prevailing assumptions that reduce the protests to isolated incidents of local grievances. To contextualize Okinawa's long history of subjugation, Takahashi briefly examines the history of the Ryukyu Kingdom and the 1609 invasion by the Shimazu clan of the Satsuma domain, which was followed by the 1879 formal annexation (*"Ryūkyū shobun"*) by the Japanese government, the postwar U.S. occupation, and the ensuing "reversion" of Okinawa to Japan. He emphasizes that Okinawan activism should not be viewed narrowly through the lens of "Cold War geopolitical reductionism," a perspective that dismisses activists "as a minor fraction of 'angry dissidents'" (p. 6). To counter such oversimplified and derogatory classifications that delegitimize activism in Okinawa, Takahashi introduces the concept of the "translocal island," arguing that Okinawan identity and resistance have been shaped by dynamic, cross-border social relations and historical processes that link Okinawa to broader anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles in the Asia-Pacific region. He highlights that "Okinawa's anti-base struggle is an aggregation of different forms of civic activism and a multitude of individuals with ideas, resources and networks that are not unitary" (p. 4). Taking his cue from the late historian Yakabi Osamu (1957–2010), Takahashi reconstructs Okinawan identity not as an innate, geographically bound state of "being" (*de aru koto*), but rather as an active, political process of "becoming" (*ni naru koto*) through shared struggle and cross-border solidarity (pp. 9–10). This "becoming" model allows for a more inclusive and fluid understanding of grassroots activism, reframing the protest community as a fluid coalition rather than a unitary bloc. On this basis, he proposes the concept of "grassroots regionalism," that is, "people's individual and collective efforts, consciousness and actions to regionalize activists' mindset" (p. 15).

In the following chapters, which focus primarily on post-1945 Okinawa, Takahashi highlights that the Okinawan anti-base movement is a complex, multi-layered historical resistance that demands local dignity and is deeply embedded in memories of war. Chapter 2, "Struggles in the US-Occupied Okinawa," provides a historical chronology of the early anti-base movements that erupted during the direct U.S. military occupation following the Battle of Okinawa. Takahashi illustrates that the roots of Okinawan resistance emerged as a grassroots struggle for basic land rights and survival, arguing that "the Okinawan resistance was shaped by a series of events and major and minor actions taken by elites and non-elites" rather than having a clear "origin" (p. 43). Following the Asia-Pacific War, the United States Civil Administration of the Ryukyu Islands (USCAR), established in 1950, began seizing vast tracts of private land for military facilities amid escalating Cold War tensions. This aggressive land requisition displaced thousands of local farmers, and in response, displaced farmers from Ie Island under the leadership of Ahagon Shōkō (1901–2002) organized the 1955 "beggars' march" (*kojiki kōshin*). This localized resistance escalated into a monumental turning point with the release of the U.S. congressional Price Report in June 1956, which endorsed lump-sum payments for "leased" land and affirmed the U.S. military's rights to acquire new land and store nuclear weapons. In reaction, Okinawans mobilized the first "whole-island struggle" (*shimagurumi tōsō*), a massive, non-partisan island-wide campaign demanding the "four principles" for land protection, including adequate compensation and the refusal of lump-sum payments. This protest, which Takahashi regards as "the hallmark in the history of the Okinawan struggle" (p. 36), pressured the U.S. administration to make partial concessions. Takahashi also traces the evolution of Okinawa's social and political landscape, noting how the energy of the 1950s land struggles was eventually channeled into the "reversion-to-Japan" movement (*fukki undō*) of the 1960s, heavily mobilized by the Okinawa Teachers and General Staff Association (OTGSA) and its leader Yara Chōbyō (1902–1997). Public anger over base-related crimes such as the 1955 Yumiko-chan Incident intensified the demand to escape U.S. extraterritoriality by returning to Japanese sovereignty. However, disillusionment with reversion soon gave rise to a minority "anti-reversion" (*han-fukki*) movement led by intellectuals such as Arakawa Akira (1931–) in the late 1960s. These critics warned that reversion would not eliminate the bases but would merely subordinate Okinawa to the U.S.–Japan security apparatus and Japanese capitalist exploitation, forming a critical intellectual genealogy for future radical regionalism.

Chapter 3, "Remaking the Site of Struggle," investigates the disillusionment with Okinawa's administrative reversion to Japan on May 15, 1972, and the subsequent qualitative shift in the nature of Okinawan activism. This chapter demonstrates that the post-reversion era forced local activists to broaden their struggle beyond anti-U.S. base protests, expanding into environmental protection and resistance against Japanese state-backed corporate developmentalism. Despite the reversion, the relative concentration of U.S. military facilities in Okinawa remained high, while the Japanese government implemented the Act on Special Measures for the Promotion and Development of Okinawa. This top-down economic integration aimed to transform Okinawa into a "new 'exotic South'" tourist destination (p. 50), as exemplified by the Oceanic Expo '75, and to turn it into an industrial hub—developments that led to rampant land speculation and the destruction of the marine environment. Against this backdrop, the Kin Bay struggle of the 1970s emerged when the Japanese government and energy corporations including Gulf Oil and Mitsubishi planned to construct a massive Central Terminal Station (CTS) for petroleum storage in Kin Bay in central Okinawa Island. The facility's operation soon caused marine pollution, devastating the livelihoods of local fishermen. In response, residents and environmentalists formed the Society for the Protection of Kin Bay (SPKB) and demanded an end to the CTS operation, sparking a decade-long legal battle against both the corporations and the local government. Although the SPKB ultimately lost in court, the struggle fundamentally expanded the meaning of "peaceful Okinawa" to include environmental rights and survival. Crucially, the Kin Bay struggle catalyzed a broader, translocal solidarity network. Intellectuals, journalists, and activists, including the prominent scholar-activist Arasaki Moriteru (1936–2018) and Arakawa Akira, formed a support group that later evolved into the Activism by the Residents of the Ryūkyū Arc (ARC) in 1976. The ARC repurposed the geological term "Ryūkyū Arc" (*Ryūkyū-ko*) into a sociocultural banner, linking isolated environmental protests from Amami all the way to Yaeyama. By organizing annual research camps and publishing journals, the ARC forged a decentralized, collective "Okinawan identity" based on shared ecological and political struggles. This era also produced innovative forms of social activism such as the *Hitotsubo* Anti-War Landowners Association (1982), which complicated military land leases by having thousands of activists buy small parcels of base land (*hitotsubo*, about 3.3 square meters), cementing a new legacy of grassroots, institutionalized resistance.

Chapter 4, "Shimao Toshio's Cultural Resistance," delves into the ideological and literary underpinnings of the grassroots regionalism discussed in the previous chapter, focusing on the profound influence of novelist and essayist Shimao Toshio (1917–1986). Shimao, a mainland Japanese intellectual who relocated to Amami-Ōshima in 1955, introduced the concept of "Japanesia" (*Yaponesia*) in his 1961 essay, proposing a reenvisioning of Japan not as a monolithic continental power but as a diverse and polycentric archipelago deeply connected to the Pacific Ocean. Within this framework, he emphasized the Ryūkyū Arc as a distinct, culturally rich southern sphere that was historically essential to Japan yet systematically marginalized. As head of the local Amami library and through his engagement in local history research, Shimao discovered the "*presence* of the past" (p. 78, emphasis in original) in the island's material landscape, such as its bone-white coral stone graves. He rejected the idea that Amami lacked history, positing instead that its cultural artifacts were simply illegible to the Orientalist, mainland gaze. Although critics such as Murai Osamu have accused Shimao of projecting a romanticized, Japanese Orientalist fantasy onto the southern islands, Takahashi argues that Shimao's cultural and geographic theories—the concepts of Japanesia and the Ryūkyū Arc—provided Okinawan intellectuals including Arakawa Akira and Okamoto Keitoku (1934–2006) with a vital emancipatory framework to deconstruct and resist the homogenizing narratives of the modern Japanese nation-state. By unpacking Shimao's critique of Japan's internal colonialism, Takahashi stresses that these concepts allowed Okinawan intellectuals to articulate a "decentralized" cultural politics that empowered the southern islands against the overpowering influence of mainland Japan and the U.S. military.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the connections and activities of "transnational anti-base activism" (p. 90) through the case of the Okinawa–Korea People's Solidarity (OKPS). Chapter 5, "From Okinawa to Asia," chronicles the "second wave" of grassroots regionalism by detailing the internationalization of the Okinawan anti-base movement in the 1990s. This chapter demonstrates that translocal solidarity was not necessarily established through a natural, preexisting affinity, but required activists to overcome deep-seated historical prejudices and Cold War ideological divides through "face-to-face relationships" (*kao no mieru kankei*) (p. 104). The catalyst for this transnational expansion came in 1986, when five former Korean conscripted laborers visited the Kerama Islands to mourn compatriots who had been forced to build suicide boats for the Japanese military and subsequently died of starvation or were executed during the Battle of Okinawa. This encounter fundamentally disrupted the Okinawan narrative of "victimhood," leading local activists to recognize the perspective of "other victims" of Japanese imperialism and to resituate Okinawa's history within a broader East Asian context. Initially, Okinawan activists sought solidarity with activists in the Philippines, inspired by the 1986 People Power Revolution and the 1991 closure of the U.S. Clark Airbase, forming the Action Committee for Solidarity with Asia (ACSA) in 1994. This initiative faded, however, as U.S. bases ceased to be a primary political issue for Philippine activists after 1992. The pivot to South Korea occurred after a 1996 visit by South Korean activist Kim Yong-han, who traveled to Okinawa to study the massive 1995 protests sparked by the rape of an Okinawan girl by U.S. servicemen. In 1998, ACSA was reorganized into the OKPS, led by figures such as Takahashi Toshio, Nishio Ichirō, and Tomiyama Masahiro. The author frames the OKPS and the Okinawa–South Korea network not simply as a seamless partnership between like-minded activists, but rather as a relationship marked by "mutual preconceptions" (p. 102). Even in the 1990s, according to the author, some Korean activists viewed U.S. bases in Japan as a "jar lid"—that is, a means of "containing any possible resurgence of Japanese militarism" (p. 102). Conversely, Okinawan activists were wary of South Korea's legacy of military dictatorship and authoritarian rule. Through frequent visits and the building of "face-to-face relationships," however, the two sides bridged this gap, resulting in effective mutual learning and collaboration: South Korean activists adopted Okinawan strategies, such as the *hitotsubo* anti-war landowner model, to disrupt military land expansion in places like Pyeongtaek and Maehyang-ri, and initiated lawsuits over noise pollution. In turn, Okinawans recognized the geopolitical reality that bases such as Kadena had served as staging grounds during the Korean War, and drew inspiration from the dynamic, youth-driven protest culture and the traditional *pungmul nori* music utilized in South Korean demonstrations.

Chapter 6, "Translocal Lives in Anti-Base Activism," explores the "invisible threads" of grassroots regionalism by examining the life histories of three key OKPS members: Arasaki Moriteru, Takahashi Toshio (1953–), and Yu Yeongja (1951–). Born in Tokyo in 1936 to Okinawan parents, Arasaki was raised as a "patriotic boy" (p. 116). However, after encountering General MacArthur's remarks describing Okinawans as "ethnically different" from Japanese, and after learning of the censored horrors of the atomic bombings and the Battle of Okinawa, his world-view fundamentally changed. After relocating to Okinawa in 1974, he advocated Okinawan "self-reliance" (*jiritsu*) and regional autonomy, while drawing on his encounters with Korean war survivors to expand the boundaries of the Okinawan struggle into an East Asian context. Takahashi Toshio, a native of mainland Kōchi Prefecture, was a former student activist from the Japanese New Left. Fleeing the violent factionalism of 1970s student movements, he moved to Okinawa in the mid-1980s and attempted to establish a local branch of his radical group. As local Okinawan activists were distrustful of radicals from the mainland, Takahashi Toshio "left student activism" (p. 129) and became a social worker, mastered the Korean language, and transformed into an indispensable coordinator of OKPS. Finally, Yu Yeongja is a second-generation ethnic Korean (*Zainichi*) born in Hiroshima. Active in the anti-fingerprinting civil rights movement in Kobe, Yu later converted to Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism, a sect she admired for its critical stance on its own complicity in Japanese colonialism. Moving to Okinawa in her sixties, she formed local study groups and joined anti-base protests. Yu serves as a crucial "bridge" (*kakehashi*) for OKPS, yet her presence also highlights internal prejudices within the movement: during a 2010 rally, local female activists reprimanded her for wearing a traditional Korean *chima jeogori* at a public gathering, claiming "the protest should be a gathering for and by 'Okinawans'" (p. 136). Through these three biographies, Takahashi argues that Okinawan activism is inherently pluralistic; the identity of the "local activist" is not restricted to indigenous Okinawans but is a complex, negotiated space encompassing individuals from diverse sociocultural and political backgrounds who actively choose to "become" Okinawan through shared struggle. Translocal solidarity, in this view, is a site of constant negotiation, boundary-crossing, and personal transformation.

The final chapter, "Invisible Threads of Regionalism," reflects on the nature of "grassroots regionalism" as a spontaneous, emotionally and ideologically driven phenomenon that operates outside formal institutions. Through an autoethnographic reflection, Takahashi emphasizes that "invisible regionalisation"—a concept Tessa Morris-Suzuki proposed to capture the organic, bottom-up formation of trans-border community and shared consciousness—is fundamentally anchored in activists' physical, emotional, and sensory connections to their home environments. These connections, he argues, enable activists to navigate and establish solidarity in unfamiliar spaces. Takahashi maintains that this practice of "locating oneself" (p. 145) through material and climatic familiarity is an elementary yet vital stage of forming transnational solidarity; thus, these emotional and sensory connections can be the "invisible threads" that sustain their cross-border endeavors for building forms of grassroots regionalism.

By tracing Okinawa's connections across the Asia-Pacific, Takahashi demonstrates throughout the book that the Okinawan struggle is a dynamic, continuous, intergenerational, and border-crossing movement—that is, a "translocal" movement—deeply interwoven with the region's broader anti-imperial and anti-colonial networks. Thematically, I would emphasize the importance of the concept of translocality itself. It is a fresh and powerful contribution to both Okinawan studies and our understanding of area studies as a whole. Rather than treating Okinawa as merely a physical or geographical domain, Takahashi carefully examines the webs of human, social, and political relationships that have shaped it. In doing so, he illustrates the connections and entanglements between Okinawa and other regions. For example, the initial "mutual preconceptions" between OKPS and South Korean activists remind us that constructing and practicing translocal activism entails not only "cooperation" or like-mindedness but also substantial disagreements and potential conflicts that can reshape the understanding of "locality" for everyone involved. Takahashi's narrative captures these tensions clearly, and I consider this one of the book's major contributions.

Building on these strengths, however, several aspects of the book invite further reflection. While I largely agree with the author's critical stance and thoughtful approach to Okinawan social activism, I have a few reservations concerning how the concept of translocality might be further developed in order to better grasp grassroots regionalism and activism in Okinawa and beyond. Takahashi makes it very clear in chapter 7 that "Okinawa's grassroots regionalism as an idea or as a movement has rarely been organized as a solid and consistent social movement. Rather, it emerged sporadically and spontaneously in response to certain historical moments" (p. 139). He stresses this "sporadic" and "spontaneous" character of grassroots regionalism to counter pervasive Cold War reductionist narratives about anti-base movements and politics in Okinawa and beyond, highlighting the significance of small-scale, individual connections and forms of participation in social activism. By describing grassroots regionalism as "invisible" yet present, rather than absent (p. 146), Takahashi offers a useful way to capture the subtle influence of organizations such as OKPS. At the same time, this framing leaves open the question of how concretely OKPS shaped activism in Okinawa and South Korea: what roles it played, what changes it produced, and what legacies it left behind. A fuller historicization of OKPS would therefore require closer attention not only to its activities but also to its longer-term effects.

Furthermore, while Takahashi's framework of translocality is compelling, the analysis could be furthered by examining the heterogeneity within the Ryukyu Islands. Historically, the hierarchical relationship between the Ryukyuan "center" (Okinawa Island, especially Shuri and Naha) and the "remote islands" (*ritō*) such as Miyako and Yaeyama has been a source of internal friction, exacerbated by heavy tax burdens on remote island residents and linguistic barriers. The economist Tamanoi Yoshirō (1918–1985), whom Takahashi also mentions, observed that understanding Okinawa requires acknowledging internal differences and divisions among its various islands, particularly between Okinawa Island and other island regions.[1] Moreover, it is worth noting that one of the key activist organizations, the ARC—in which Arasaki also actively partici-

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1 Tamanoi Yoshirō, "Furusato wa chikaku ni arite tsukuru mono: chiiki no shisō o kizuku tame ni," [Home Is Something You Build Nearby: Toward Constructing a Philosophy of the Region] Chiiki shugi no shisō [The Idea of Regionalism] (Tokyo: Nōsan Gyoson Bunka Kyōkai, 1979), 276.

pated—foregrounded the very issue of differing positions and "isolations" among islands within the Ryūkyū Arc. Given this, the translocality of Okinawa could be further elaborated by examining in greater depth the discussions of intra-Ryukyu relations by the ARC and other activists. This issue has become increasingly urgent in light of recent developments in and around Okinawa. For a long time, the outer islands remained relatively peripheral to mainstream anti-base activism in Okinawa, which focused primarily on the U.S. bases on Okinawa Island. Today, however, the military buildup of the Japanese Self-Defense Forces in the Miyako and Yaeyama Islands amid growing geopolitical tensions renders these intra-Ryukyuan dynamics increasingly urgent. Although the author briefly touches upon this unequal relationship through the biography of OKPS member Tomiyama Masahiro from Miyako, a more sustained engagement with the complexities of intra-Ryukyu relations would have helped readers better understand the unfolding process of grassroots regionalism.

Lastly, while the book makes excellent use of diverse materials, it leaves room for further discussion regarding its engagement with previous scholarship and the broader historical context. Although Takahashi adeptly explores the Okinawa–Korea connection through his focus on the OKPS, the analysis could have been enriched by situating this relationship within the wider geopolitical entanglement of Korea, Okinawa, and mainland Japan during the cold war(s) in East Asia. For instance, it would have been illuminating to examine how the "discovery" of Bae Bong-gi in 1975 played a role in this dynamic, as her case poignantly revealed the long-marginalized history of Korean comfort women in Okinawa and underscored the deep, complex linkages between the two regions. In delving into these multifaceted issues, the study's contextualization might also have benefited from engaging more fully with recent scholarship such as Narita Chihiro's work on the Okinawan reversion within the East Asian Cold War context.[2] Oh Sejong's book on Koreans

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2 Narita Chihiro, *Okinawa henkan to Higashi-Ajia reisen taisei: Ryūkyū/Okinawa no kizoku, kichi*

in Okinawa, together with the English translations of Lim Kyounghwa's works on Okinawa-Korea connections, would have added another dimension to our understanding of this transnational network.[3]

These reservations notwithstanding, Takahashi has produced a well-researched, highly engaging volume that succeeds brilliantly in rescuing the Okinawan struggle from geographical isolation and historical amnesia. Not only does this book challenge dominant orthodoxies regarding Okinawan identity and social activism, but it also adds a new dimension to our understanding of how marginalized communities forge invisible threads of solidarity across the Asia–Pacific. This book deserves a wide readership and will be of particular value to scholars of Japanese and Okinawan history as well as to readers interested in grassroots regionalism, transnational social movements, and the enduring legacies of the Cold War in East Asia.

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mondai no hen'yō [The Reversion of Okinawa and the East Asian Cold War Regime: Transformations in Ryūkyū/Okinawa's Political Status and the Military Base Issue] (Kyoto: Jinbun Shoin, 2020).

3 Oh Sejong, *Okinawa to Chōsen no hazama de: Chōsenjin no "kashika/fukashika" o meguru rekishi to katari* [Between Okinawa and Korea: History and Narratives of the Visibility and Invisibility of Koreans] (Tokyo: Akashi Shoten, 2019); Lim Kyounghwa, "The Mutual Gaze of Okinawans and Zainichi Koreans in Post-War Japan: From 1945 to the 1972 Okinawa Reversion," *Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* 17, no. 8 (April 15, 2019), Accessed April 29, 2026. https://apjjf.org/2019/08/lim; Lim Kyounghwa, "Examining the Significance of the Movements to Document Minority Histories and 'Comfort Women' for the Japanese Military in Okinawa," *Seoul Journal of Japanese Studies* 7, no. 1 (2021).

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