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Encounters and Perspectives of Politics and
Culture in Eurasia Edited by Selcuk Esenbel

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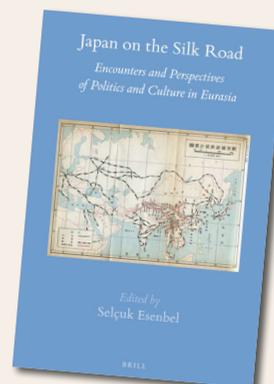
BOOK REVIEW

Japan on the Silk Road: Encounters and Perspectives of Politics and Culture in Eurasia

Edited by Selçuk Esenbel

Brill, 2018
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Reviewed by Jan SÝKORA



A plethora of books on the geopolitical significance of Central Eurasia has been published in the many years since Halford J. Mackinder advanced his thought-provoking theory of the heartland as a pivotal area for taking control of the world.¹ The crucial questions regarding what Eurasia is, and how to control it, dominated scholarly and political debates throughout the short twentieth century. Central Eurasia has become one of the hottest issues in the international arena since 2013 when China launched her ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, generally referred to as the New Silk Road. Coined by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905) in 1877, the term Silk Road *per se* was an apt designation for the new wave of exploration and discovery of the vast Eurasian geo-space from the Mediterranean to the coastline of East Asia, a rich source of ancient and medieval encounters between Europe and Asia.

Conventional wisdom has it that Japan rejoined the global community as a latecomer and embarked on a journey to “civilization and enlightenment” (*bunmei kaika*), implementing a policy of Westernization and catch-up with the Western powers. However, it is less well known that in Meiji Japan there were also men of politics, military men, entrepreneurs, and intellectuals who did not veer so strongly to the West, and who were drawn rather to countries and regions located particularly in Central Asia. Indeed, for Japan, perceived as an insular, maritime country located on the easternmost point of the ancient Silk Road, such multifaceted engagement in continental Asian and Eurasian sub-regions offered an entirely new perspective. The new perspective constituted an important element in the burgeoning imperial ambitions of the late Meiji, Taishō, and early Shōwa periods. Current scholarship on the spatial, geo-cultural and intellectual dimensions of the Silk Road, both ancient and new, is more or less Sino-centric, and publications focusing on modern and contemporary Japanese encounters with Eurasia are still relatively rare.² From this perspective, *Japan on the Silk Road: Encounters and Perspectives of Politics and Culture in Eurasia* edited by Selçuk Esenbel is, without doubt, an impressive contribution to the field of modern global history.

1 Mackinder 1904; Mackinder 1919.

2 Notable examples include Len et al. 2008; Murashkin 2020.

The editor of a book focused on such a complex problem as a “multidisciplinary exposé of Japanese transnational history along the Silk Road” (p. 3) during the imperial period faces the tricky dilemma of approach. In general, he or she has three options: first, to define the topic and analyze it using different methodological approaches; second, to sketch a single methodological framework for the discussion of different aspects of the problem; and third, to follow a strict chronological pattern and analyze the vast range of problems in terms of different time segments. Selçuk Esenbel, who has assembled a team of eminent scholars from various parts of the world, has adopted a fourth and more difficult option of combining the three aforementioned approaches. The result is a fascinating volume comprising sixteen extremely heterogeneous chapters, which differ significantly in thematic topics (from Japan’s strategic interest in the Central Eurasian region via the view of right-wing Pan-Asianist radicals on the Middle East and Islam to the rise of Turkish philology and linguistics in Japan), methodological approaches (from political history and geopolitics to literary and translation studies), and analytical scope (from historical narrative via comparative textual analysis to a simple list of publications by Japanese scholars on the Old Uyghur culture).

It might be noted that the editor herself points to the heterogeneity in her introductory chapter, and categorizes the topics of the papers into five distinct groups. Unfortunately, the structure of the book does not reflect her categorization, since most chapters relate to more than one category. The result of this editorial strategy is an impressive collection of first-class essays, which lack the imaginary “red thread” for the reader to discover and follow. Indeed, the true intellectual value of the book consists in the individual chapters, which reveal a wealth of almost untouched archival material, especially primary and secondary sources located in Japan. Due to the space constraints of this review, it is impossible to do justice to each chapter, but if I had to mention the lowest common denominator, it would be the changing view of the role of Central Asia in global history, and the significance of Japan’s contribution to knowledge production about Eurasia, particularly during Japan’s imperial period.

Despite its shortcomings, *Japan on the Silk Road: Encounters and Perspectives of Politics and Culture in Eurasia* is, without doubt, an eminently readable and inspiring study of relatively new phenomena that require deeper investigation, particularly from a comparative perspective. It should have a place in the bookcase of all enthusiastic students and scholars of Japanese and Central Asian affairs.

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