

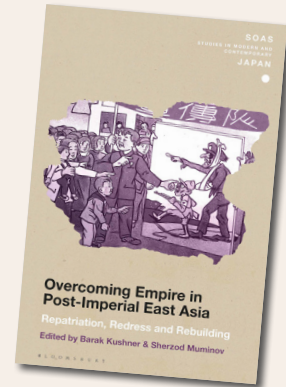
BOOK REVIEW

Overcoming Empire in Post-Imperial East Asia: Repatriation, Redress and Rebuilding

Edited by Barak Kushner and Sherzod Muminov

Bloomsbury, 2020
279 pages.

Reviewed by Steven IVINGS



Overcoming Empire in Post-Imperial East Asia, edited by Barak Kushner and Sherzod Muminov, is the second of several multiauthor volumes derived from Kushner's European Research Council project entitled, "The Dissolution of the Japanese Empire and the Struggle for Legitimacy in Postwar East Asia, 1945–1965." The first volume, *The Dismantling of Japan's Empire in East Asia*, addressed the macro picture at the end of Japan's colonial and wartime empire, examining issues of regional order, "deimperialization," migration, legitimacy, and justice, along with a plethora of contributions on more specific themes. At sixteen chapters plus an introduction, that first volume provided a comprehensive, if somewhat Japan-centric, reassessment of the period by leading scholars in the field. Many were well-known in Japan but publishing in English for the first time, so the volume added considerable depth to the literature in English on the period. Collectively, it provided a strong corrective to the assumption that, with defeat, Japan effortlessly morphed from a cosmopolitan empire into a homogenous nation-state.

It was thus with great anticipation that the reviewer waited for the second volume, and for the most part it does not disappoint. *Overcoming Empire in Post-Imperial East Asia* is slimmer than its predecessor, with ten chapters plus an introduction, and this time the contributors are largely emerging scholars. The volume should not, however, be seen as leftovers from Kushner's project. First of all, the volume presents a less Japan-centric understanding of how state and society were reformulated in East Asia following the collapse of Japan's colonial and wartime empire. Only two of the chapters are primarily Japan-focused (Doglia, Stegewerns) and thus the second volume supplements the first with more extensive treatment of the situation in China, Korea, and Taiwan. The chapters discuss how issues of reconstruction, migration, and memory—both from the colonial period and as an immediate result of the Japanese empire's collapse—lingered, and to some extent shaped, those societies. There is no sharp divide between the two volumes, but broadly speaking the first addresses the deimperialization of Japan, while the second primarily focuses on the decolonization of East Asia, both messy processes, complicated particularly in the latter instance by civil and cold war conflicts.

This second volume is also noteworthy for addressing some of the shortfalls in the study of East Asia's transition from the Japanese colonial empire to the early postwar period.

As Muminov notes in his introduction, few scholars have been willing to cross the prewar-postwar divide, or indeed the borders of postwar nation-states, in their appraisals of the colonial period or postwar East Asia. Many works on the legacy of the Japanese empire in Japan have failed to include primary sources from the former colonies, whilst much of the early literature produced in the former colonies themselves was painted with a nationalistic brush, providing a rather caricatured vision of colonial rule. A new generation of scholars, however, are more willing to engage in comprehensive archival research in several languages, and this volume is a testament to that trend. Several of the contributors have combined archival work in both Japanese and English alongside the same in Chinese or Korean, and in one case (Hirata) Chinese and Russian. In this sense, the individual chapters contribute greatly to our understanding of this contested period by adding newly available archival materials and by ambitiously traversing national viewpoints and historiographical traditions.

The themes addressed in the volume are internment and repatriation of Taiwanese; foreign refugees in China; early narratives of the Korean War in occupied Japan; colonial architecture in postwar South Korea; representations of East Asia in postwar Japanese cinema; anti-imperialism and legitimacy during the Chinese civil war; the afterlife of Manchukuo's industrial base in postwar China; administrative and bureaucratic aspects of regime change; struggles for compensation for forced labor; and the postwar history of former military sites in Japan—in this case the chemical weapons facilities on Ōkonoshima. Each of the chapters provides new insights into the process of overcoming empire.

I would like to mention here two contributions of particular note. First, Hirata Koji's study of the industrial afterlife of empire focuses on the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) reconstruction and utilization of heavy industries built up during the Japanese colonial period. That the Japanese-built industrial base in the Chinese northeast played an important role in China's early postwar economy and the CCP's victory in the Chinese civil war is reasonably well known. However, exactly how the CCP was able to effectively utilize this colonial legacy and turn it into "Red China's Ruhr" (p. 148) is less well understood, at least outside of China. Hirata sheds light on the practical efforts of the CCP to rebuild. Recognizing the scarcity of skilled human capital, the CCP sought to reconcile both Chinese nationalists and Japanese to their cause. While propaganda played a role, a basic respect and appreciation shown towards former enemies willing to contribute to the CCP's cause was critically important. As a result of the CCP's efforts, over twenty thousand Japanese remained in Manchuria in 1950, many of them technicians, engineers, and other essential skilled workers (p. 153). Having been employed in the state-led Manchukuo industrialization drive, particularly during the war itself, these former industrial technicians of the Japanese empire needed little persuading on the merits of economic planning from CCP cadres.

The contribution by Chang Chihyun on the Chinese Maritime Customs Service (CMCS) in the period 1950 to 1955 is also noteworthy. The largely foreign-staffed CMCS was established in 1854, very much in the context of growing Western imperialism. Over time, however, it became an effective revenue-generating arm of the Chinese state. Tainted by its connections to imperialism, the survival of CMCS influence into the postwar years was unlikely given the collapse of the Western and Japanese empires and the establishment of a Communist regime in mainland China. Nevertheless, as Chang ably shows, the institutional know-how and human capital of the service and its link to state finances

meant that the CMCS's staff had a part to play in the administrative reformulation of early postwar East Asia and thus the CMCS cast a long shadow over successor services following its dissolution. Though the outcomes varied across the states concerned, Chang shows how administrative reform was also a key site of ideological conflict and one in which imperial structures proved surprisingly resilient. In Japan, under the auspices of the Allied Occupation, cosmopolitan CMCS staff would play a role in reformulating Japan's own customs service.

Contributions such as these make for an admirable volume of work that prompts readers to rethink the sharp divide of 1945, and to better appreciate the continuities and interconnections which shaped postwar efforts to overcome empire in East Asia.

REFERENCE

Kushner and Muminov 2016

Barak Kushner and Sherzod Muminov, eds. *The Dismantling of Japan's Empire in East Asia: Deimperialization, Postwar Legitimation and Imperial Afterlife*. Routledge, 2016.