

JAPAN ON THE SILK ROAD: ENCOUNTERS AND PERSPECTIVES OF POLITICS AND CULTURE IN EURASIA. Edited by SELÇUK ESENBEL. pp. xvi, 374. Leiden, Brill, 2018.  
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Since the concept of the Silk Road was introduced in 1877 and especially through the twentieth century, Japan has been a major player in its promotion as a route of cultural and religious transmission across Eurasia. Despite this, Japan is often omitted from Silk Road maps and dialogue, especially with the rising political and economic role of China, exemplified by their Belt Road Initiative (BRI). This collection of papers is therefore a welcome addition to the literature, hopefully helping to reorient the orient of the Silk Road by highlighting Japan's role into the modern era.

The papers, from an impressive international group of scholars, are from a conference held in Turkey. This is another country whose role in the pre-modern trade routes across Afro-Eurasia is often also overlooked, especially given the wider importance of the Turkic steppe and Turkic empires in central Asia.

The story, however, starts in an age of empires, framed by the British and Russian engaged in their so-called 'Great Game', as discussed by Ian Nish. Building railways to provide access to and control of Asia was part of this—mirrored today in the BRI—and the Russians led the way with plans for the Trans-Siberian to Vladivostok, alarming Japan across the sea. Nish discusses both the covert and more open attempts by various Japanese travellers to garner intelligence prior to the railway's construction. The former included a military survey of China in 1879 by Japan's future Prime Minister, Katsura Tarō (1848–1913), only one among many such operations: as Nish notes, there were “numerous itinerant Japanese wandering around China in various disguises”. The motives of one such traveller, Fukushima Yasumasa (1852–1919), on his horseback journey across Siberia in 1892–3 are discussed in the papers by Sven Saaler and Selçuk Esenbel. As they make clear, gathering intelligence on both military and scholarly matters was not seen as incompatible or unusual. And it was during this period, as Saaler notes, that the concept of the Silk Road took hold in the Japanese imagination. This is a theme that continues into the twentieth-century, as the several papers covering the expeditions sponsored by Ōtani Kōzui (1876–1948) make clear.

Brijj Tankha consider Ōtani's expeditions in the context of the role of travelogues in Japan to “reinforce the modern and civilized status” of the state (p. 155). Restructuring Buddhist sects was part of this modernising agenda. Tankha looks at Otani alongside the architect Itō Chūta (1867–1954), to show how they both sought to redefine the traditions in their own fields to fit a modern Japan. Miyuki Aoki Giradelli notes that Itō Chūta sought to find evidence for Greek influence on Japanese architecture on his extensive tour across Eurasia (and to the USA) between 1902 and 1905; most especially in his Ottoman travels. He came to a more nuanced conclusion, that “there was no exact border between the East and the West, but rather a continuum of forms”. (p. 256)

Itō Chūta was advisor on the design of Ōtani's Villa Niraku in Kobe, intended to incorporate elements from Ōtani's central Asian travels and to provide a home for his collection, as discussed by Erdal Küçükyağın. Many of the papers reflect the richness of the Japanese intellectual world of this period with scholars in various fields trying to position Japan in the modern world with new ideas and new forms of art and architecture, while ensuring that it retained its uniqueness. Otani's sister, for example, was active in the women's emancipation movement and responsible for opening a women's college and the first modern hospital in Japan. Of prime concern was demonstrating that Japan was equal with other cultures, especially western cultures, but also could be “the interpreter of the Orient, as a country that harmonised the East and the West”. (p. 172)

Central Asia was key in this discussion, and Komatsu Hisao discusses the influence of Abdurreshid Ibrahim (1857–1944) on Japanese approaches to this region during his stay in Japan in 1909. Li Narangoa considers northwest China, central Asia and, particularly, Mongolia in terms of their strategic position for a possible Japanese attack on the Soviet after the Japanese occupation of Manchuria in the early 1930s. Cultural campaigns to gain support from the population were part of Japanese preparations. The rhetoric stressed the common origins of the Mongolians and Japanese and their activities included the scholarly as well as the political, with a monthly research journal.

Another group of papers considers the history of Japanese studies in Turkic language and linguistics. Partially motivated by the desire to find a brother peoples in central Asia, Japanese scholars were at the forefront of Silk Road studies, as highlighted in the review of their scholarship in the 1959 report to UNESCO—sadly a subject not covered in this collection. Katayama Akio reviews notes on the Turks in historical sources. Modern Turkic studies in Japan were promoted by central Asian explorations with the first publications by Tachibana Zuichō (1890–1968), a member of the Ōtani expeditions, who had learned Uyghur during his travels. Klaus Röhrborn discusses Tachibana and the subsequent—initially—stuttering development in this field up to 1988. Mehmet Ölmez brings the story up to date and both papers have extensive bibliographies.

A. Merthan Dündar looks at the relationship from the Turkic side, reviewing how the sympathy for the Japanese in the Russo-Japanese war was reflected in the folk literature and poetry of Turkic peoples, such as the Crimean and Idil-Ural Tatars. The view of Japan by outsiders is continued by Banu Kaygusuz's paper on Felice Beato (1834–1907), whose albums of photographs taken in Japan covered subjects from landscapes, ethnography and battle scenes.

Two articles discuss how literature has been used to reflect contemporary society. Satō Masako takes us back to the medieval period in Japan and the reworking of ancient elements in the 'The Heavenly Young Prince' to make it relevant to the medieval imagination. Oğuz Baykara traces the political motives of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892–1927) in translating a Chinese Tang period tale, 'Du Zichun' (杜子春), into a children's story, 'Toshishun'. It was published in 1920 during a period of social turmoil and intended partly, argues Baykara, as an exposure of Japan's social ills.

By the middle of the twentieth century the rise of right-wing political factions in Japan lead to potential conflicts between nationalism and internationalism, During this period, as Christopher Szpilman discusses, west and central Asia become peripheral to the discussion, which is concerned more with China and the Soviet Union.

The book contains an excellent introduction by the editor, Selçuk Esenbel, which brings together these strands and stands alone as a very useful overview of Japan's role on Silk Road matters, political, cultural, and scholarly.

There are several fascinating themes running throughout this book, for example, the role of railways in the modernisation campaigns during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These include the Trans-Siberian and Otani's proposal for a Tokyo-Istanbul-Berlin line. My main quibble is that here the index is rather patchy, impeding follow up. A final copyedit would also have caught the several errors and inconsistencies in transliteration. But these are minor concerns and do not seriously detract from what is a fascinating and invaluable volume. <[stowhitfield@gmail.com](mailto:stowhitfield@gmail.com)>

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