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Whither East Asia? Reflections on Japan's Colonial Experience in Taiwan

By Robert Eskildsen

[*We present two articles on a critical moment in the history of Japanese imperialism on Taiwan, the nature of the impact of colonialism on indigenous people, and contemporary ramifications of that history. In the first of these, Robert Eskildsen reflects on the broader issues of Japanese colonialism for contemporary East Asia in light of the 1874 Taiwan expedition and contemporary assessments of it. The second is Nishida Masaru's report on a commemoration of the expedition involving Japanese NGOs and villagers at the site of the Mudan Incident toward framing a people's reconciliation: "Japan, the Ryukyus and the Taiwan Expedition of 1874: toward reconciliation after 130 years."* Japan Focus]

What nation will be dominant in East Asia? The question will elicit different answers today than in 1874, the year of the Taiwan Expedition, but it still offers a useful starting point for contemplating the fascinating commemoration of the expedition that Nishida Masaru describes in his article.

By 1874 some Westerners had begun to believe that Japan held an advantage over China because Japan had committed itself to the Western system of trade and diplomacy. Still, China had advantages of size, resiliency and cultural accomplishment that could not be ignored, and Japan's material advantages over its larger neighbor would not become indisputable until the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95. The Taiwan Expedition therefore took place during the interlude after Japan had abandoned its early modern system of trade and diplomacy but before its decision to participate in the Western system had produced an unmistakable advantage over China. In historical retrospect, of course, we have come to expect that Japan would eventually become politically predominant in East Asia because of its decision to "Westernize," but such an outcome was neither automatic nor obvious at the time of the Taiwan Expedition. It only became obvious after two related political processes had nearly run their course, one by which Japan clarified its western and southern borders and the other by which China's diplomatic dominance in East Asia waned under repeated attacks from Western powers and Japan.

Indeed, one of the biggest stories in the history of nineteenth-century East Asia is the decline in China's regional influence. China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War was certainly a watershed moment, but in Japan perceptions of China's decline started much earlier. Banno Junji goes so far as to suggest that by the end of the Tokugawa period China had already become an example of all that Japan should not be, and the country had already committed itself to a course that Fukuzawa Yukichi would famously describe, decades later, as "escaping Asia." (1)

The Meiji Restoration gave Japan the flexibility to pursue changes in the diplomatic status quo in East Asia, but the changes carried with them enormous risks. Domestically, Japan implemented radical institutional changes in order to conform more closely to Western norms, but doing so alienated important constituencies—farmers and samurai—and ultimately provoked armed rebellion. In foreign relations, Japan set out to learn the norms of Western diplomacy and use them to clarify a number of border relationships: with Russia in the north, Korea in the west, and China in the south—through a complex intermediate zone that included the Ryukyu archipelago and Taiwan. The process of redefining Japan's borders in the west and south proved particularly troublesome and embroiled Japan in a sustained challenge to China's diplomatic supremacy in East Asia that involved gunboat diplomacy, diplomatic coercion and armed conflict. Although it involved no clash with Chinese forces, the Taiwan Expedition was the earliest of these armed conflicts.

Fast forward to the present, and we see that some of the issues that clouded the future of East Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century have contemporary analogues, although the geopolitical context has changed dramatically in the last 150 years. The biggest difference in the geopolitical context, of course, is that all the states in the region, with the possible exception of North Korea, are committed to operating within the international system and they have developed a measure of economic interdependence. These factors will mitigate the possibility of armed conflict in the future. On the other hand, nationalism, the legacies of Japanese imperialism, World War II and the Cold War, and China's growing economic stature already exacerbate diplomatic conflicts, and they undoubtedly will continue to do so for many years to come. Against this geopolitical backdrop, three contemporary strategic conflicts stand out as particularly troublesome.

The first and most dangerous conflict concerns the long-term fate of North Korea. To be sure, the Korean Peninsula has been a perennial strategic concern in East Asia for well over a century and echoes of past conflicts loom over the fraught six-party negotiations that are primarily a legacy of the Cold War.

The second strategic conflict involves China's and Japan's competing claims to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. The islands importance lies in the fact that, under international law, they can be used to defend or refute competing claims to natural resources and sovereignty over large areas of the surrounding seas. In this case, potential undersea oil fields and competing claims concerning the status of Taiwan's sovereignty are at stake. Certainly the conflict has arisen partly because of China's growing economic power, which has led both to a more muscular foreign policy, and to China's drive to secure much needed sources of energy. In other respects, however, the conflict reprises debates from the late nineteenth century over the boundary between China and Japan. All sides in the debate rely on historical claims to sovereignty, but many of the claims are dubious because they ignore the necessarily ambiguous nature of sovereignty during the early modern period in the archipelago zone that lies between China and Japan, a zone that includes the Ryukyu Archipelago, Taiwan and the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. In effect these historical arguments anachronistically project modern notions of national sovereignty back into a past time when such notions held no significance.

The third strategic conflict in the region concerns the long-term fate of Taiwan. Here too, dubious historical claims to sovereignty inform the debate. Taiwan's history, and in particular the history of statist powers on the island, is long, complex, and contested,(2) and it is unlikely that debates about whether China has sovereignty over Taiwan will be decided any time soon. The history of the Taiwan Expedition may shed light on these debates because the expedition illuminates the historical roots of this contemporary conflict. Indeed, many of the questions about sovereignty in Taiwan—as construed under international law—were first raised in the diplomatic sparring related to the expedition.(3) Questions about Taiwan's status also have roots in the Japanese colonial period, since large parts of the island remained outside of state control until the Japanese colonial regime integrated them by force, and since, as some scholars have argued, "modern" Taiwanese identity was forged during the colonial period. Taiwanese identity,

according to such arguments, is necessarily post-colonial and thus distinct from mainland Chinese identity.(4)

The contemporary strategic conflict over Taiwan thus involves thorny questions of sovereignty, national identity, and the legacy of Japanese imperialism. The commemoration of the Taiwan Expedition that Nishida describes is particularly interesting because all of these questions are so clearly woven into it.

To begin with, the commemoration that Nishida describes enacts a postwar Japanese ritual that makes a gesture toward atoning for past Japanese aggression in East Asia. Such rituals usually address the legacy of Japan's war in Asia more openly than they do the legacy of Japanese imperialism, but in his commentary Nishida brings up the matter of Japanese imperialism by making a rare link between the Taiwan Expedition and the later colonization of Taiwan. I have sought to stress this link in my own work, but until recently most Japanese scholarship has ignored it. A willingness to cast more light on the early origins of Japanese imperialism may help set the stage for a more thorough public examination of the history of the Japanese empire, including its dissolution at the end of World War II. Nishida's commentary thus hints at a broadening of postwar rituals of atonement that may promote a fuller discussion of the legacy of Japanese imperialism.

At the same time, the commemoration relies on a thoroughly contradictory appreciation of frames of national identity. Ultimately the frames affirm national identity and draw attention away from potentially uncomfortable questions about the history of identity in Taiwan. In particular, the commemoration implies that the villagers of Mudan are representative of all of Taiwan's aborigines, and ultimately of Taiwan as a whole. This is problematic for two reasons. First, because it imposes a uniform identity on the aborigines that echoes their status as the "uncivilized" other to Japan's "civilizing" colonial regime, although Nishida Masaru in this article focuses explicitly on the Mudan. And second, because it flattens distinctions between the aborigine and Han Chinese populations of Taiwan. The commemoration therefore ends up framing Japanese atonement in terms of both a uniform aborigine identity that, historically, was imposed through colonial rule and a uniform national identity that ignores crucial ethnic differences. In this sense, conventional frames of national identity trump the history of Japanese imperialism, and the commemoration, by naturalizing national identity (instead of presenting it historically), effaces a host of difficult questions about who the Taiwanese really are—Chinese, aborigine, or something else that was forged in the particular experience of the Japanese colonial period.

Nishida's description of the commemoration reaffirms arguments—resting on dubious historical claims—about sovereignty that date from the Meiji period. He states that the Taiwan Expedition gained Qing recognition of Japanese sovereignty over the Ryukyus. In fact, the fact Qing dynasty and the Ryukyuan monarchy contested Japan's claim to the Ryukyus for many years afterwards. By ignoring the contested nature of Japan's annexation of the Ryukyu Kingdom, Nishida implicitly accepts a frame of Japanese national identity that obscures the way that the projection of state power, and more generally imperialism, helped to form the modern Japanese nation-state. In this way the national frames used in the commemoration tend to derail attempts at reconciliation because they efface a recognition of the role that the imposition of national frames played in generating and justifying past conflicts. Imperialism (both Japanese and Western) played a crucial role in birthing modern nationalism in East Asia, and gestures at reconciliation, however well-intentioned, will not go very far toward easing rancor about the legacy of Japanese imperialism unless they acknowledge this connection. Instead, such gestures will tend to have the counterproductive effect of validating some of the most important, and perhaps most galling, consequences of Japanese imperialism.

Not surprisingly the commemoration that Nishida describes is as much about contemporary debates over the historical understanding of the modern nation-state as it is about reconciliation. The take-home message, however, is that nineteenth-century debates about whether East Asian states should enter the Western-dominated international system have been superceded by twenty-first-century debates that pit the history of national identity against the history of imperialism. The annual visits of the Japanese Prime Minister to Yasukuni Shrine, and the predictable responses they provoke both inside and outside of Japan, are a good example of how these debates usually play out. The persistence and repetitiveness of the ideological clashes between Japan, China, the Koreas and Taiwan over how to address the legacies of World War II and the Japanese empire suggest that, no matter what nation is dominant in East Asia, debates based on irreconcilable points of view about the history of imperialism and national identity will be a stable, long-term feature of the post-Cold War order.

Notes:

(1) Banno Junji, *Kindai Nihon no gaiko to seiji* (Tokyo: Kenbun Shuppan, 1985), 3-21.

(2) For insights into this history see the articles in the special issue about Taiwan in the May, 2005 *Journal of Asian Studies*.

(3) See my "Of Civilization and Savages: The Mimetic Imperialism of Japan's 1874 Expedition to Taiwan," *American Historical Review* 107.2 (April, 2002). (http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/ahr/107.2/ah0202000388.html)

(4) Leo T. S. Ching, *Becoming "Japanese": Colonial Identity and the Politics of Identity Formation* (Berkeley: University of California, 2001); Mau-kuei Chang, "On the Origins and Transformation of Taiwanese National Identity," in *Religion and the Formation of Taiwanese Identities*, ed. Paul R. Katz and Murray A. Rubinstein (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003). 23-58.

Robert Eskildsen is Assistant Professor of Japanese History at Smith College and the author of the introduction to a special issues of The Journal of Asian Studies *(64, 2, May 2005) on varieties of colonialism on Taiwan and their impact on indigenous people. Posted on Japan Focus, November 20, 2005.*

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