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Book Review



Robert Eskildsen, *Transforming Empire in Japan and East Asia: The Taiwan Expedition and the Birth of Japanese Imperialism*. New Directions in East Asian History. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. ISBN: 9789811334801 (hbk). xix + 383pp. € 79.99.

The colonisation of Taiwan is multilayered. As argued by Leonard Gordon in *Confrontation over Taiwan*, few of the many islands that dot the coast of the east Asian mainland have experienced the length of exposure to international intrigue as Taiwan (2017: xvii). Its colonial experiences, shaped over 400 years, witnessed both European and Asian imperialism over different parts of the island. Two-thirds of the nearly 14,000 square mile land is occupied by forested hills and mountains that spread through the centre of the island and outward to the Pacific-bordering coast on the island's east side. The remaining flat, undulating plains of the west were the primary site of settler-colonial expansion that began with the Dutch in the seventeenth century. The inhabitants of the mountainous and east coast are Austronesian-speaking indigenous communities. Little to no effort was made by the differing colonial authorities, from the Dutch and Spanish of the seventeenth century to the Manchus of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to occupy these areas. That was the case until a crew of 54 Ryukyuan sailors were murdered by Paiwan indigenous people after becoming shipwrecked on the southwestern tip of the Hengchun peninsula in December 1871.

In June 1874 Saigō Tsugumichi, a general in the Meiji Imperial Army who was appointed head of the Tokyo military garrison, penned a letter from southern Taiwan asking permission to colonise the indigenous territories of the island. A year earlier, he had a disagreement with his brother Takamori over a proposed invasion of Korea. Tsugumichi had opposed it, whereas his brother was strongly in favour. The rationale for Tsugumichi's application to invade the indigenous territory was punishment for the massacre of the Ryukyuan sailors. In his letter he spoke of his concerns over the reaction of the Manchus

and promised that he would cancel the invasion if the threat of conflict with Imperial China arose. He spoke of this anxiety to Charles Le Gendre, an American advisor to the Japanese foreign ministry. 1874 also marked the year that the Kingdom of Ryukyu had terminated their tribute to the Manchus, and over the following year, jurisdiction over Ryukyu had changed from the Meiji Foreign Ministry to the Home Ministry. In 1879 the Meiji government would formally announce the annexation of Ryukyu and establish it as the Okinawa Prefecture. Robert Eskildsen argues in *Transforming Empire in Japan and East Asia* that the 1874 Expedition exposed broad strategic competition between Japan and the Manchus over Taiwan, Ryukyu, and later Korea, the highpoint of which would be the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) that was fought on Korean soil but would see Taiwan ceded to Japan.

Transforming Empire makes three significant contributions: (1) It was clear that the Japanese plan to send an expeditionary force to Taiwan in 1874 was a starting point in the colonisation of Taiwan's eastern seaboard that would result in the Japanese colonisation of indigenous territories. (2) The 1874 Expedition would highlight the Meiji government's embrace of colonisation as a desired political option and one that 'bore a deep and systematic relationship to the processes of political, social, and cultural change in the Meiji Restoration' (p. 8). (3) The attempts to colonise eastern Taiwan marked the foundation of Japanese imperialism and a cooperative relationship with Western imperialism. These three claims made by Eskildsen mark *Transforming Empire* as a significant contribution to understanding the development of Japanese imperialism under the Meiji government.

The book is divided into three main sections. The first places the expedition in a regional context. The four chapters that make up this section foster an understanding of the evolution of imperialism from the restoration of the Meiji in 1868, to the justification of colonisation following the shipwreck in 1871, and the eventual expedition to Taiwan in 1874. Eskildsen's use of primary sources in this section is noteworthy. Its contribution to scholarship on nineteenth-century Taiwan is significant. The second section, titled 'On the Ground in Taiwan', explores the different and often competing strategies employed by the Japanese military. For those of us that research and document indigenous peoples, chapter 7 is important. Here Eskildsen marks an important breakthrough in our understanding of the Japanese perspective on the 1874 Expedition. This, coupled with the work of Douglas Fix and John Shufelt on Charles Le Gendre in *Notes of Travel in Formosa* (2012), offers a well-rounded picture of the non-indigenous perspective of the expedition. The third and final section of the book looks at the Japanese authority's justification of the

invasion of indigenous territories. It analyses the negotiations for a colonial settlement and the justification for this move in Japanese media.

The book, although full of fact and description, is not heavy. It has a prose that is easy to follow and there is an almost detective-like narrative that makes it hard to put down. This book is a must-read, not just for anyone interested in Japanese imperialism and nineteenth-century Taiwan, but for those with an interest in the history of the region. The 1874 Expedition was the first overseas deployment of the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy. It revealed a fragility within the Manchu Empire and would encourage the Japanese to press further, laying the foundations for Japanese colonial expansion.

Niki J.P. Alsford | ORCID: 0000-0003-1939-4313

Professor in Asia-Pacific Studies, School of Humanities,
Language & Global Studies, University of Central Lancashire,
Preston, Lancashire, UK
njpalsford@uclan.ac.uk

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