

Japan's Imperial Underworlds: Intimate Encounters at the Borders of Empire. By David R. Ambaras (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). Pp 281. Paper, \$31.99.

David Ambaras's recent book *Japan's Imperial Underworld: Intimate Encounters at the Borders of Empire* is a well-researched work that moves toward a decentralized narrative of Japanese imperialism from the 1870s to the 1940s. He contests the top-down model of imperial history by shifting the focus to ordinary people on the margins of the Japanese nation-empire to explore how they challenged and redefined the territoriality and spatial imaginaries of imperial Japan. By examining the media discourse of transgressive intimacy through "child trafficking, ethnic intermarriage and marriage migration, travel and adventure writing, and privacy" between Japan and China, he aims to highlight that the fluidity and complexity of the territory and border (p. 3). Posing these as discursive constructs, Ambaras argues that the territory and border were not wholly subjugated to official regulation by imperial authority, but rather remained continually under negotiation. His discussion of transgressive mobility offers new insights into the debate on "relations between Japan and China during an era marked by the destabilization of Sinocentric regional order and then decades of informal and formal imperialism" (p. 3).

Unlike previous scholarship on Japan's imperial engagements with China, which focuses overwhelmingly on Manchuria or the north, Ambaras moves his readers to the South China Sea, with its unique topography in the context of expanding Japanese imperialism and the changing Sinosphere.¹ Mapping the imperial world in contrast to the state-centered geopolitical accounts provided by Peter Duus, Ramon H. Myers, and Mark R. Peattie, he offers a thorough reading of media discourse and government records.² He evidences the intimate encounters to reconstruct the physical and mental trajectory of historic actors at the margins, thereby demonstrating that histories of Japanese empire "must be told as much from their frayed edges and fluid interstices as from their centers of power." (p. 28). Those mobile subjects that have been examined in this account, who in his words, not falling into "tairiku rōnin" (continental adventurers) or overseas sex workers—the two most common categories in the discussion of Japanese who moved into this region—are key threads guiding readers through the continually evolving process of imperial spatiality (p. 11). His focus on individuals does not, however, separate this study from the course of imperial studies: the emphasis remains focused on the course of Japanese imperialism. To concretize a decentralized approach to the narrative of Japanese empire, the author thus chooses "micro history" as his methodological device to empower individuals rather than state's position in the making of the empire. *Japan's Imperial Underworld* incorporates several case studies, each of which embodies a certain experience of transgression and illustrates the broader construction of spatial imaginaries and imperial topography.

¹ See, for example, Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism*, Twentieth-Century Japan (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998) and Hyun Ok Park, *Two Dreams in One Bed: Empire, Social Life, and the Origins of the North Korean Revolution in Manchuria*, Empire, Social Life, and the Origins of the North Korean Revolution in Manchuria (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

² Peter Duus et al., *The Japanese Informal Empire in China, 1895-1937* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

The first two chapters examine the discourse of cross-border mobility between Japan and China by looking into cases of child trafficking and marriage migration. Japanese children who were trafficked to China and “abducted” women are respectively spotlighted as the main historical agents in each chapter. Ambaras shows how the “forced” mobility of children and women provoked concern from Japanese authorities about their borderland and territories which were still not yet well-defined. These mobile subjects constitute bodies which physicalize and symbolize borders themselves. As the author identifies, the vulnerability of both children and women on the metaphorically speaks to, “the vulnerability of a nation-empire in the process of becoming” (p. 69). Set in the historical context of the nation-building project from the Meiji period through the expansion of Japan’s formal and informal imperialism in East Asia in the following years, each case of transgression embodies the tension between efforts to regulate territory and border by the state authority, and violations of the official spatial formation by mobile agents.

Ambaras changes his narrative strategy in the following two chapters by focusing on two exemplary practitioners of border transgression who were active in media—Nakamura Sueko and Andō Sakan, who helped construct discourses of fantasies and fear surrounding the South China Sea. Each played different roles in the transgressive intimacy: the former was a Japanese wife married to a Fujianese man who was later in life constructed as a “pirate queen,” while the latter was a China-hand and ideologue of ethnonationality and empire (p. 20). Both stimulated fantasies of fear and desire about the unknown colonial space through press and popular literature in Japan. Ambaras combines their biographical introductions with the contextualized accounts of their practices and presences in the press to show how spatial discourse was not only in flux, but also gendered. Ambaras also grapples with theoretical accounts on gender by Julia Kristeva and Christine Murrin to illuminate gendered discourse as it played out in the border-making between Japanese imperial ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ in the South China Sea. By and large, the portrayal of both actors helps Ambaras destabilize the discourse of national boundaries in East Asia and recover the contingency and complexity inherent to spatial relations. Nevertheless, this section would be further enhanced with a clear justification for his choice of historical actors... Particularly, it would be helpful to situate Andō as a literary writer with other *gaichi* literary writers (though this is mentioned in passing) and further demonstrate their place in the formation of popular discourses on imperial spatiality (p. 172-173).

The last chapter attempts to illuminate the continuous influence of transgressive mobility on bilateral relations into the contemporary era. The repatriation of Japanese remaining in Fuqing after 1945 is discussed with profound observation on recent media discourses and popular voices on the mutual relations of the two countries (p. 214-219). Though it does not necessarily bring us to a conclusion regarding current political affairs, it inspires us to rethink the geopolitical debates with a renewed historical lens. Japan’s Imperial Underworlds helps us understand how popular discourses of ‘Others’ have continued alongside the discourse of the fall of imperialism in East Asia.

Despite its minor faults, the book offers a fresh departure from prevailing state-centred scholarship on Japanese imperialism. It offers new perspectives for constructing historical accounts about the Japanese nation-empire itself and bilateral relations between Japan and

China. Students of East Asian international history will find this work valuable as it leads readers to a critical rethinking of key geopolitical concepts, such as territory and border, in its regional contexts.

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