



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2016

**Rezension von: Catherine Phipps, Empires on the Waterfront: Japan's Ports
and Power, 1858-1899 (2015)**

Dusinberre, Martin

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2016.1158202>

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich

ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-131174>

Journal Article

Published Version

Originally published at:

Dusinberre, Martin (2016). Rezension von: Catherine Phipps, Empires on the Waterfront: Japan's Ports and Power, 1858-1899 (2015). *Japan Forum*, 28(2):260-262.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2016.1158202>

I strongly recommend this book to all scholars with a general interest in decentralization politics and democracy, and to those particularly interested in the tensions between institutional frameworks and civic participation. Although the book gives no answer to the question of what twenty-first century local political participation should look like, the study successfully and clearly identifies the limits of the current local self-government system's reforms, particularly with regard to strengthening and promoting democratic participation. It is surely a matter of regret that this study was published in German and is therefore only accessible to a limited audience.

References

- Mannheim, K. 1964 [1928]. Das Problem der Generationen. In: K. H. Wolff, ed. *Wissenssoziologie. Auswahl aus dem Werk*. Berlin, Neuwied: Luchterhand, 509–565.
- Beck, U. and Sopp, P. 1997. Einleitung: Individualisierung und Integration – eine Problemskizze. In: U. Beck and P. Sopp, eds. *Individualisierung und Integration: Neue Konfliktlinien und neuer Integrationsmodus?* Opladen: Leske + Budrich, 10–19.

© 2016, Carmen Schmidt
 University of Osnabrück, Germany
carmschm@uni-osnabrueck.de
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2016.1151915>

Catherine L. Phipps, *Empires on the Waterfront: Japan's Ports and Power, 1858–1899*, Harvard University Asia Center, Cambridge, MA, 2015, 308 pp.

The large entrance hall to Kobe Maritime Museum is dominated by a 1:8 scale model of a British man-of-war. The *Rodney*, we read, was one of a squadron of

ships – including the *Ocean*, *Basilisk*, *Rinaldo*, *Rattler*, *Cormorant*, *Sylvia*, *Adventure*, *Salamis*, *Manilla* and the somewhat less impressive-sounding *Snap*, a gun-boat – that opened the port of Kobe to international trade on 1 January 1868. Two days later, the Satsuma and Chōshū domains declared an ‘imperial restoration’ in Kyoto. The coincidence of these two events serves to underline the popular association, even today, of the Ansei treaty ports – Yokohama, Nagasaki, Hakodate, Kobe and Niigata – with Japan's international engagement during the Meiji period (1868–1912). But as Catherine L. Phipps argues in her excellent book, *Empires on the Waterfront: Japan's Ports and Power, 1858–1899*, ‘a framework that relies on the treaty ports alone misses the much more complex system of maritime relations that developed in East Asia during this pivotal era’ (p. 4). In fact, when the abolition of the unequal treaties came into effect in 1899, Japan boasted no less than 28 open ports (41 if one includes those in Taiwan and the Pescadores): the aforementioned five, plus Osaka (but excluding Tokyo), plus a newly opened Taketoyo, and then 21 others, whose handling of international trade in some cases dated back to the early 1880s. These 21 ‘special trading ports’ are the focus of Phipps's important study.

The Meiji-period special trading ports existed because of what the unequal treaties did not forbid: for Japan to open additional ports if the government so desired. As a result, the first of three types of special trading ports were opened in the early 1880s. These focused on Japan's trade with Korea – for which, geographically, the treaty ports were not best suited. There were five initially – including Izuhara (1883), Sasuna (1888) and Shishimi (1889), all located on Tsushima – and Western merchants were not allowed here. Although some foreign firms found ways around this restriction, the predominance

of Japanese merchants was one of the most important characteristics of the special trading ports in general. By the 1890s, more than 90 per cent of international trade in these ports was run by Japanese nationals, in contrast to non-Japanese handling 80 per cent of trade in Yokohama.

The second type of port identified by Phipps were the 'special export ports', eleven of which opened after 1889 (including the additional designation of both Hakata and Shimonoseki from the earlier type). These ports illustrated the growing importance of two export commodities to the Meiji state by the mid-1880s: coal and rice. Thus, their locations both reflected the fact that 50 per cent of Japan's coal came from Hokkaido and 40 per cent from Kyushu (e.g. Otaru in the former and Karatsu, Kuchinotsu and others in the latter), and also mirrored the rice-growing regions and exchange centres of the nation (e.g. Yokkaichi). Finally, the third type were the world trade ports, opened in the aftermath of the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895) and following a sustained campaign by politicians and businessmen. As with the first type, they focused on a particular trading partner – in this case, Russia – but, in a new development, they were permitted to engage in import as well as export trading. Hamada, Nanao, Sakai and Tsuruga, all located on Honshu's Japan Sea coast, were among those that received this designation.

Empires on the Waterfront is timely in that it lays out a new, five-act chronology for Japan's engagement with Western powers between 1853 and 1899 and offers as a case study one port – the northern Kyushu hub of Moji, which connected many of the sites recently listed by UNESCO as central to Meiji Japan's industrialization. Two middle chapters on Moji in the mid-1890s are based on impressive empirical work and include, for example, a wonderful description of how coal was loaded onto

Western steamships, and a much-needed retelling of the Sino-Japanese war from the perspective of ports, ships and that key fuel, coal. In her extensive usage of the *Moji Shinpō* newspaper, Phipps shows how local reporters, one of whom had an extraordinary transpacific career, recalibrated the conflict from 'Japan's war' to 'Moji's war', in which '[t]he rest of the archipelago was but a backdrop' (p. 200).

Phipps advances a number of important arguments that enrich our understanding of late nineteenth-century Japan. First, she shows the extent to which the Meiji Restoration was a spatial revolution, in which previously unknown locales came to assume new significance. We are familiar with this argument – and its concomitant, that previously important regions were made peripheries – from the work of scholars such as Kären Wigen (1995), to whom *Empires on the Waterfront* is dedicated. Phipps uses the example of northern Kyushu to consider the 're-regionalization' of Japan, in which the development of the coal industry and the ports, alongside the emerging railway network, cut across previous domainal boundaries – as exemplified by the neologism 'Chikuhō', coined in the 1880s. But, as Phipps convincingly demonstrates, this spatial transformation was as much a question of the sea as of the land. By focusing on coal exports, Phipps identifies how northern Kyushu came to be embedded in the imperial and trading networks of East Asia more generally – a phenomenon that she describes using the borrowed term, 'transmarine East Asia'. 'Japan's modern international history,' Phipps states early on, 'is essentially a maritime story' (p. 19), and *Empires on the Waterfront* stands as an eloquent testimony thereto.

A second argument relates to what we might describe as regional 'agency' under the treaty port system. Just as Pär Kristoffer Cassel (2012) has demonstrated the

importance of local contexts to the actual operation of extraterritorial law in East Asia, so Phipps identifies the key work of local boosters to the successful establishment of the Japanese special ports. Of course, Western states, through their imposition of the unequal treaties, bound Japan into what Phipps calls the status of 'semicolony'. But Japan also benefited greatly from the presence of Western empires in East Asia: in particular, British shipping networks in Asia – including between Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai – offered a new international market for Kyushu coal, such that 'Japan was able to make effective use of the extensive commercial networks established through informal imperialism' (p. 253). Astute businessmen such as Kyushu's Yasukawa Keiichirō (1849–1934) were among the first to spot these new opportunities, thus raising Japan's own maritime presence in East Asia. By focusing on Yasukawa and others, Phipps makes an important English-language contribution to a Japanese-language historiography on regional industrialization already distinguished by the work of historians such as Nakamura Naofumi (2010).

Connected to the emergence of this regional-global matrix, Phipps also argues that the special trading ports 'offer important new information about how Japan was able to advance economically and militarily at the end of the nineteenth century' (p. 10). Her case is that while the first Sino-Japanese War was clearly a turning point in the balance of power in East Asia, there were significant continuities across the 1894–1895 divide in the realm of Japanese 'industrialization, imperialism, and identity formation' (p. 215) – continuities that are made visible by her focus on the special trading ports. Regional development connected to the coal industry in 1880s Kyushu, for example, served as 'significant groundwork' (p. 149) for post-1895

industrialization. Here and throughout the book, Phipps advances her arguments thoughtfully, marshals her evidence with care, and demonstrates the great contribution of a geographic approach to our understanding of Meiji Japanese transformations. But I wonder if she could not have been bolder in her final conclusions. To my mind, the story she tells, particularly in the context of some of the other works cited above, begins fundamentally to redefine the whole meaning of the 'local' and the 'global' in modern Japanese history, and thus has the potential to upset the rather formulaic rhetoric of 'the local to the national to the global' that Phipps herself – once – falls back upon in her Conclusion (p. 251). The great contribution of *Empires on the Waterfront* is exactly this focus on empires in a local, maritime context; but what analytical room that leaves for 'the national' in the above formulation is a problem that Phipps implicitly invites other scholars now to address.

References

- Cassel, Pär Kristoffer, *Grounds of Judgment: Extraterritoriality and Imperial Power in Nineteenth-Century China and Japan*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2012.
- Nakamura, Naofumi, *Chihō kara no sangyō kakumei: Nihon ni okeru kigyō bokkō no gen-dōryoku* [The Industrial Revolution from the Regions: The Driving Force behind the Rise of Business in Japan], Nagoya Daigaku Shuppankai, Nagoya, 2010.
- Wigen, Kären, *The Making of a Japanese Periphery, 1750-1920*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995.

© 2016, Martin Dusinger
 University of Zurich
martin.dusinger@hist.uzh.ch
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09555803.2016.1158202>