

A Book Review:

The Middle East in the Eyes of Japan

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If one wants to understand the interactions between East Asia and the Middle East, the Japanese discovery and reinterpretation of the Middle East, as a useful link, should be reviewed in a gingerly manner. The book, *Nihonjin no chūtou hakken (The Japanese Discovery of the Middle East)* by Hideaki Sugita (杉田英明), Professor at the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, University of Tokyo, Japan, would offer unique and interesting clues in linking Japan to the Middle East with a comparative perspective.

The Middle East as a geopolitical concept appeared first by US geostrategist Alfred Thayer Mahan in the journal of *National Review* on September, 1902. It originally covers a wide range of regions between Arab and India surrounding the Persian Gulf. According to the author, the Middle East as a modern symbol was invented by the Europeans to divide the East into two sectors: the Near East centered on Ottoman Empire and the Far East dominated by Chinese Qing Dynasty (Hideaki, 1995: 4).

Due to the distant location and the lack of cultural affinity, Japanese relationship with the Middle East has not been vigorous traditionally. Historically, Japanese relations have been active with China in “touyou(東洋: the Orient)” and the countries in “nanyou (南洋: the South Ocean).” In the modern period with the gradual demise of the established order in the East, Japan’s contacts with Western powers in “seiyou (西洋: the Occident)” and Russia in “hokuyou (北洋: the North Ocean)” continued to keep the balance of power in the region and to promote “wakon yousai (和魂洋才: Japanese Spirit and

Western Techniques).”

In an effort to create a unique point of view different from the West, “chūtou (中東: the Middle East)” is rephrased as “chūyou (中洋: the Medient)” in Japan, which is initiated by Ken Kobayashi (小林元) and developed by Tadao Umesao (梅棹忠夫), although it is assumed that the Medient is more extensive including India. The Middle East, thus, as a distant area for Japan, was not a critical zone of national interests before Russo-Japanese war in 1904. In the modernization process in the Meiji period, however, Japan should have encountered and discovered the Middle East for its developmental needs from a conflicting perspective both as a family in the East and a new member of the West.

This book is an extensive exploration on Japanese relations with the Middle East from cultural, political, and diplomatic perspectives until the end of World War II. It is divided into three sections: (a) Persia and Rome: Cultural Exchanges in Ancient and Middle Age; (b) The Forming Process of the Middle East Images in the Eyes of Japan: From Tokugawa Period to Modern Era; and (c) The Discovery of Japan by the World of Modern Middle East. As one of series books on the Middle East and Islamic world published by the University of Tokyo Press, it intends to explain the evolving nature of mutual identity and bilateral images in the process of historical and cultural exchanges between Japan and the Middle East. By extensively focusing on Japanese cultural exchanges with the Middle East including literature, poem, and paintings, the book offers a new framework to review and discover important parts of bilateral relations between East Asia and the Middle East in a unique way.

According to the author’s argument, what is more, Imperial Japan’s approach towards Egyptians tremendously changed after the final victory of Russo-Japanese War. In the eyes of Japan, Egypt has been mirrored as a victim by the ruthless Western powers. With the victory against Romanov Russia which was buttressed by the UK-Japan alliance, Tokyo’s strategic outlook towards the Middle East had no choice but to be reoriented obviously. Now, Egypt is not seen as an innocent victim but a useful textbook for Japanese own

imperialism to manage the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910) in the Korean peninsula as its exclusive colony.

Hirondo Tomizu (戸水寛人), Professor at the Tokyo Imperial University, for example, has published books entitled *Egypt and Chosun* in 1904 and *Tunisia and Chosun* in 1905. According to *Egypt as a Model for Managing the Protectorates* written by Japanese journalist Bouzou Kato (加藤房藏) in 1905, it was claimed clearly that “We Japanese also should do this (like the UK did in Egypt)” (Hideaki, 126-127). In addition, it is also clear that Japan has used the Pan-Islamic force against the potential security threat from Russia after the Russo-Japanese War while cultivating good diplomatic conditions for its expansion toward China beyond the Korean peninsula, by forming “Asaia gikai (亞細亞議會: the Asian Congress)” between Abdürreşid İbrahim (1857-1944) and Takeyoshi Ohara (大原武慶) in Tokyo on June 7, 1909. It was a strategic effort to unify Pan-Asianism led by Japan with Pan-Islamism to hedge against Russia (Hideaki, 227-228).

To sum up, although the book is not providing evolving aspects of Japanese understanding on the Middle East since 1945 and their implications, it offers a very unique angle to understand the cultural interactions between Japan and the Middle East in the long term, and to expect the future direction of strategic interactions between East Asia and the Middle East based on the historical trajectories of Japan linking the Middle East and Islamic world as a strategic coalition to build up so-called Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. It is not only the Japanese discovery of the Middle East, but also an important rediscovery of the Medient between the East and the West.

Reference

- Hideaki, S. (1995). *Nihonjin no chūtou hakken: gyaku enkinhou no naka no hikaku bunkashi (The Japanese Discovery of the Middle East: A Comparative Cultural History in Mutual Perspectives)*. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.