Placing Empire

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This project started with a simple question. What did Japanese travelers see when they went to colonial Korea, Manchuria, and Taiwan? Put differently, what did it mean to “see” Korea, Manchuria, or Taiwan as a Japanese traveler under empire—what did it mean to see territories that were once decidedly foreign and then, suddenly, were not? Japanese travelers in the early 1900s remembered clearly the transformation of these lands into Japanese colonies. But the issue is not one of Japanese history alone. Early American travelers to Hawai‘i traveled with memories of the independent Hawaiian kingdom and its overthrow by American colonists in 1893. And though travelers from Great Britain and France operated within empires of longer standing, they too found themselves struggling to negotiate how the many pasts of colonized lands could reasonably be transformed into evidence of the progressive history of their imperial nations.

Because of the global context in which we might ask this question, its answer bears directly on long-held assumptions about the uniqueness of Japanese imperialism. In the first major English-language study of the Japanese Empire as a whole, Mark R. Peattie set out what would become the standard framework for defining the Japanese Empire within the larger history of modern imperialism. “As the only non-Western imperium of recent times,” he wrote, “the Japanese colonial empire stands as an anomaly of modern history.” He further elaborated on the peculiar nature of Japanese imperialism: “Because it was assembled at the apogee of the ‘new imperialism’ by a nation which was assiduously striving to emulate Western organizational models, it is not surprising that it was formally patterned after the tropical empires of modern Europe. Yet the historical and geographic circum-
stances of the overseas Japanese empire set it apart from its European counterparts and gave it a character and purpose scarcely duplicated elsewhere.”

For Peattie, the unique circumstances were three. One, Japan had become an imperial power at precisely the moment when it extracted itself from its own unequal treaties with the United States and other Western powers. Thus, the Japanese government saw clearly the significance of territorial expansion to geopolitical power. Two, the Japanese Empire was late to the scene, in the sense that Japan acquired its first formal colony, Taiwan, in 1895. The lateness of Japan's empire meant that there were few unclaimed territories, especially in Asia, which had been the site of intense colonization by European empires for over a hundred years. And three, the cultural and ethnic makeup of the territories Japan did acquire was markedly different from what the world had seen in European and American empires. “Because it was an Asian empire,” Peattie argued, “its most important colonies, Taiwan and Korea, were well-populated lands whose inhabitants were racially akin to their Japanese rulers with whom they shared a common cultural heritage. This sense of cultural affinity profoundly shaped Japanese attitudes toward colonial governance once the empire was established.”

The idea that its geographic contiguity and internal cultural cohesion set the Japanese Empire apart from European and, indeed, all other modern empires, has had a long life. In their widely influential introduction to Tensions of Empire, Ann Stoler and Frederick Cooper refrained from addressing “the meaning of empire in regard to contiguous territory . . . in which the colonial pattern of reproducing difference might in theory be mitigated by the geographic possibility of absorption more readily than was the case overseas.” Though Stoler and Cooper have each more recently revised this earlier position, other broad, comparative studies within the growing field of “new imperialism studies” have similarly excluded territorially contiguous empires while simultaneously slipping between theoretical discussions of “modern imperialism” and “modern Western imperialism.”

Yet, as did their imperial counterparts in the United States, Great Britain, and France, hundreds of thousands of Japanese people traveled to the Japanese colonies of Korea, Manchuria, and Taiwan during the first half of the twentieth century to pursue precisely this question of whether their imperial territories were, or would necessarily produce, a coherent political, historical, linguistic, and cultural space. Indeed, it was the apparent need for an answer to this question that motivated their travel in the first place. Querying what it meant for a Japanese traveler to “see” Korea, Manchuria, or Taiwan under Japanese colonial rule thus became a concrete approach for exploring questions of deep relevance not just to the provincial realm of modern Japanese history but also to the history of modern empire: what do representations of place have to do with the production and reproduction of imperial formations in the context of colonialism, capitalism, and nationalism? How does place bear on the postcolonial history of settler colonialism, which,
since most colonial empires did not abandon the entirety of their colonial holdings, is not so “post” colonial after all? And what does imperial tourism, a phenomenon of equally global provenance, have to do with all of the above?

The answer that this book proposes is that place was a key tool for sustaining imperialism in a period in which the world’s major empires, including the Japanese, largely disavowed territorial conquest as a practice of legitimate states. The shift from empire as a project of territorial acquisition to one of territorial maintenance necessitated the production of new social and spatial imaginaries of the nation that could coexist with the imperial territory of the state. In this endeavor, place, like race and ethnicity, served both as an axis along which colonial difference could be defined and exploited and as a symbol of national identity that could encompass the entirety of the imperial territory without distinction. Tourism emerged in this era as the technology par excellence for producing firsthand experiences and representations of the space of the nation and of the colonies as places within it. These experiences and representations legitimated imperial claims to colonized land while at the same time presenting the colonies as spaces of exception to metropolitan political, economic, and social norms.5

While many of the conflicts that motivated the spatial politics of Japanese imperialism had contours that were specific to the Japanese Empire, the underlying need to legitimate the territorial claims of the state in the language of nationalist attachments to the land was rooted in the broader social and historical forces that shaped the global transition from a world of empires to a world of nation-states in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. From this perspective, the historical significance of the geography of the Japanese Empire is not the uniqueness of its contiguity or the cultural cohesion that this contiguity implied. Rather, it is the variety of ways in which colonial boosters and imperial travelers made the relationships between the empire’s places meaningful. From history to language to memory and to movement itself, imperial travelers and colonial boosters saw and experienced colonized lands in ways that legitimated their incorporation into the Japanese Empire and promoted the territorialization of a Japanese national identity on colonized land. In other words, the historical significance of the geography of the Japanese Empire lies not its uniqueness but rather in how it exposes the centrality of spatial politics to the survival of empire in the twentieth century.

I began this project over ten years ago, in a research seminar led by Tak Fujitani. The question I explored then was of the politics of tourist guidebooks. In the intervening years, I have found it necessary to expand and revise my analysis of tourism in the Japanese Empire from one that focused on how tourist guidebooks reflected broader discourses of Japanese imperialism to one that argues that tourism was essential to the maintenance of empire itself. In a nearly decade of research, I discovered a truly astonishing quantity and geographic diversity of materials related
to travel and tourism in the Japanese Empire—ranging from travel accounts to anticolonial manifestos to the history of national parks. The most important forces behind the evolution of this project, however, were the generous encouragements, suggestions, and critiques that colleagues, editors, fellow panelists, and interested individuals offered at every stage of the project. I am truly grateful for their time and engagement.

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