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Viktor Shmagin. "They Fear Us, yet Cling to Us: Russian Negotiations with Tsushima Domain Officials during the 1861 Tsushima Incident." *The International History Review* 39:3 (2017): 521-545.

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Review by **Hansun Hsiung, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science**

Once upon a time, the puzzle of the Tokugawa polity (1603-1867) powered nearly all scholarship on the history of early modern Japan. There was, to begin with, the famous equivocation of historian Asakawa Kan'ichi, who from his New Haven desk in 1918 characterized the Tokugawa political system with the vague phrase "no longer purely feudal."¹ Meanwhile, debates raged between his Japanese colleagues. Animated by Marxism, these latter sought to prove that the structure of Tokugawa rule was in fact resolutely "feudal," in order to decipher the degree to which modern Japan had indeed transitioned to capitalism, paving the way for a socialist dawn.²

Anglophone contemporaries adopted this 'feudal' categorization with their own qualifications. E.H. Norman, himself of Marxist orientation, chose the term "late feudalism"; Edwin Reischauer, apostle of modernization theory, borrowed from economic historian Honjō Eijirō the concept of "centralized feudalism."³ Interest in centralization in turn filtered into 1960s historical writing in Japan, marked by increasing attempts to revalue

¹ K. Asakawa, "Some Aspects of Japanese Feudal Institutions," *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan* 46:1 (1918): 76-101.

² For a quick summary of these debates, see Andrew E. Barshay, *The Social Sciences in Modern Japan: The Marxian and Modernist Traditions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 54-57; more generally, Germaine A. Houston, *Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

³ E. Herbert Norman, *Japan's Emergence as a Modern State: Political and Economic Problems of the Meiji Period*, 60th anniv. ed. (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 12; Edwin O. Reischauer, "Japanese Feudalism," in *Feudalism in History*, ed. Rushton Coulborn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 26-48.

the “absolutist” features of the Tokugawa regime.⁴ Although battles over the nature of the *baku-han taisei* – the shogunate-domainal system – continued, the field’s maturation gradually yielded studies which eschewed grand pronouncements. So it was that the 1990s saw, most notably, the work of Philip Brown, who argued for a non-linear timeline of vacillation between the Tokugawa shogunate’s “nominal authority” versus its “capability” for enforcement, and of Mark Ravina, who portrayed Tokugawa Japan as a “compound state” at the intersection of “suzerain,” “patrimonial,” and “feudal” authority.⁵ More recently, Luke Roberts has sought to grasp these ambiguities through the paradigm of performance. Neither decidedly feudal nor absolutist, Tokugawa power quite consciously allowed itself to be articulated differentially. Creating disparate spaces for domains to “simultaneously express both ‘autonomy’ and ‘complete subservience’” was a means of coordinating the local needs of different actors, audiences, and their respective political theaters, toward the goal of overall peace and stability.⁶

As Viktor Shmagin—Roberts’s former doctoral advisee—so artfully demonstrates in “They Fear Us, Yet Cling to Us,” the puzzle of the Tokugawa polity was not only a problem vexing twentieth-century academics. Rather, it had by the 1860s already come to play a central role in Japanese diplomacy. Extending Roberts’s insights into the realm of international relations, Shmagin’s article illustrates that Japanese actors deliberately utilized the ambiguity of central and local authority in their interactions with foreign powers, choreographing performances of state weakness to gain what advantage they could over better-armed imperial aggressors at their doorstep.

In few cases was this more evident than in the Tsushima Incident of 1861, for which Shmagin’s article serves as the most detailed anglophone analysis. When, on 13 March 1861, Russian naval commander Nikolai Birilëv arrived in Asō Bay off the coast of the island of Tsushima, he came with the assumption that “the feudal structure of the Japanese Empire,” in the words of his distant superior, General-admiral Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaëvich, would permit “an amicable deal with the local ruler without entering into dealings with the central government [the Tokugawa]” (528). Birilëv and company were not alone; British Consul-in-Residence Sir Rutherford Alcock also held that Japan’s “semi-independent Princes” possessed only “nominal fealty” to the shogun (528). Their viewpoints were bolstered by a false analogy between Tsushima and the Ryūkyū kingdom, and by the fact that Tsushima, in order to maintain trade relations with Korea, was a formal vassal of both the Tokugawa shogunate and the Chosŏn kings. Operating precisely on this misapprehension, Britain and Russia, alert to Tsushima’s critical location in the Korean Strait, considered occupying the island.

It was the Russian navy, however, who in the end acted, resolving as early as May 1860 to eventually establish a presence on the island, either in the form of a military base, or more ambitiously, through the island’s

⁴ For a summary of debates up to this point, see John W. Hall, “Feudalism in Japan—A Reassessment,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5:1 (1962): 15-51.

⁵ Philip C. Brown, *Central Authority and Local Autonomy in the Formation of Early Modern Japan: The Case of Kaga Domain* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 26-29; Mark Ravina, *Land and Lordship in Early Modern Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 40-43.

⁶ Luke S. Roberts, *Performing the Great Peace: Political Space and Open Secrets in Tokugawa Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2015), 5.

incorporation as a military protectorate. The course of the Russian navy's ultimately failed attempt, in Shmagin's analysis, reveals how a "mistaken understanding of local conditions"—specifically, the relation of domainial to shogunal power—was strategically encouraged by Japanese actors as a tool of negotiation (552). From May to September of 1861, and particularly from early July onward, officials of Tsushima's ruling Sō clan tempted Birilëv with verbal promises that the domain was eager to break away from the Tokugawa and enter into Russian protection. Simultaneously, however, the Sō coordinated closely with Tokugawa agents in Edo and Nagasaki to rid the island of its unwanted foreign guests. Through this "political performance, carefully staged for Birilëv so as to put him off," Sō officials succeeded in buying the requisite time for the Tokugawa to form an agreement with the British to ward off Russian forces (534). A misunderstanding concerning the nature of the Tokugawa polity, in short, lay at the heart of Tsushima's political cunning, enabling "a show of submission intended as a tactic of resistance" (538).

This, then, is the crux of Shmagin's overarching contribution. In its strange semi-feudal ambiguity, so existing historiography tells us, the Tokugawa shogunate could not survive in a modern world of nations. Crumbling by the mid-nineteenth-century; beset, in the famous phrase of the period, by "troubles within and catastrophes without" (*naiyū gaikan*)—by upstart domainial lords, unruly samurai, discontented merchants and peasants, and Western imperial encroachment—the shogunate had to give way, inexorably, to the Meiji Restoration, and the rise of a new centralized nation-state. This interpretation is not wholly true, Shmagin counters. Although the shogunate unquestionably faced a series of civil and diplomatic crises in its later years, it nonetheless retained substantially greater strength than we have been led to believe. Indeed, those very images of weakness which support our standard narrative could at times be performative ruses, manipulated to encourage an "underestimation of the cohesiveness of the Japanese polity" among foreign powers (523). Rather than simple disunity within, the Tokugawa state's fluctuation between shogunal and domainial authority fostered flexibility and resilience against threats from without.

That historians of Japanese international relations have heretofore overlooked this point may be attributed not only to residual biases favoring the inevitability of the modern nation-state, but, more practically, to questions of sources and training. Shmagin is one of new generation of scholars whose mastery of the paleographical and rhetorical difficulties of Tokugawa documents is combined with expertise in archives and languages outside of East Asia, and outside of the hegemonic triumvirate of English, French, and German. American and British sources in particular have occupied an arguably disproportionate role in the reconstruction of mid-nineteenth-century Japanese diplomacy, and—stray works aside—it is only within the last decade that studies have undertaken to recapture the diversity and dynamism of Tokugawa interactions with other imperial powers.⁷ By examining Russian sources untapped by historians of Japan, and Japanese sources untapped by historians of imperial Russia, Shmagin is able to demonstrate just how convinced Russian actors such as Birilëv were of Japanese borderlands that were ready to leave a decentralized feudal state, and how Japanese actors played this confusion to their advantage.

Along the way, Shmagin furthermore beats an alternative path for exploring the impact of Russian imperialism on the emergence of modern Japanese international relations. Historians to date have undervalued this impact, tending to root narratives in official state diplomacy. Yet, as Shmagin emphasizes, Russian imperial expansion in East Asia took place largely in the form of the "private deal," as part of a

⁷ In particular, Fukuoka Mariko, *Puroisen Higashi Ajia ensei to bakumatsu gaikō* [The Prussian East-Asian Expedition and Japanese Diplomacy in the Late Edo Era] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2013).

programmatic agenda to insulate the foreign ministry from more uncertain ventures (528). The Russian foray into Tsushima was precisely one such example, conducted as a naval initiative with the explicit intention of giving the government deniability in case of complications. Turning to such ‘private deals’ thus offers a fruitful line of inquiry for future research on Russo-Japanese relations in the Tokugawa and Meiji periods – a field admittedly lacking in Anglophone scholarship, which has routinely ignored the influence of actors outside of western Europe and the United States.⁸

Shmagin teases out the broader significance of Russian imperialism for Tokugawa Japan in a series of tantalizing suggestions near the end of his article. Specifically, he proposes that the Tsushima Incident, a seeming diplomatic success for the shogunate, also catalyzed actors who would ultimately bring about the regime’s downfall, and crystallized key themes that would inform Meiji Japan’s imperial ambitions. To the extent that the shogunate appealed to British aid to rid Tsushima of the Russian presence, it also opened itself to increased criticism concerning its own military weakness in the face of Western aggression. To the extent that the episode exposed the tactical importance of the Korean Strait, it also promoted the view—dominant by the mid-1870s—that the security of Japanese borders would require control over Korea.

If Shmagin is correct, then the Tsushima Incident in particular, and Russian imperialism in general, deserves to occupy a far more prominent role in our narratives of nineteenth-century Japan than they do at present. Apart from the handful of monographs cited in his article, standard accounts of Japanese history remain largely ignorant of the event. One need look only so far as our major textbooks: Andrew Gordon and Brett Walker make no mention of the Tsushima Incident, while Marius Jansen and Conrad Totman dedicate less than a sentence to it in total.⁹ In this sense, “They Fear Us, Yet Cling to Us” presents a welcome challenge. Historians of Japanese international relations have long obsessed over the counterfactual of whether or not the Tokugawa shogunate would have fallen had Admiral Matthew Perry not arrived in 1853. But what if the Russian navy had not sought to take Tsushima in 1861? Was the Tsushima Incident, in fact, the straw that broke the camel’s back – the last genuine diplomatic success of the Tokugawa shogunate, as well as the start of its downfall?

Such speculations are merely hinted at in “They Fear Us, Yet Cling to Us.” To answer them would require a far more detailed account of Tsushima’s shifting internal politics than Shmagin offers. The Sō clan, Tsushima’s custodians, had a checkered history with the Tokugawa, having originally chosen to fight against the latter in the epochal Battle of Sekigahara of 1600 that cemented the shogunate’s rise. On the losing side, the Sō were delivered from Tokugawa vengeance due to the acknowledged importance of Korean trade, in which Tsushima held a privileged position. By the late 1850s, however, this trade had waned, and the domain’s finances were in dire straits. Three years prior to the events described in Shmagin’s article, plans had already been floated to place Tsushima under direct Tokugawa control, since the island was already relying ever more on shogunal subsidies to prop up its flagging economy. Three years after the events described in

⁸ This situation has begun to shift, most recently with Shō Konishi, *Anarchist Modernity: Cooperatism and Japanese-Russian Intellectual Relations in Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

⁹ Marius B. Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 302; Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 549; cf. Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Brett L. Walker, *A Concise History of Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

this article, a coup shook the Sō clan, resulting in the execution of key domain officials, such as Inspector General Ōura Norinosuke, on the grounds that they subscribed to a pro-imperial ideology. Put simply, Tsushima was in many ways a peculiar case. There is thus reason to suspect that the ‘cohesiveness’ of the Tokugawa polity, to which Shmagin repeatedly alludes, was far more precarious than he indicates, and that shogunal success in dealing with the Russians at Tsushima owed more to other contingent factors than to any essential strength.

An answer to the larger questions adumbrated by Shmagin’s article would also benefit from closer comparisons to Chinese and Korean examples. Shmagin states early on that the Tokugawa regime “was still capable, unlike contemporary China or Korea, of mounting an effective response to a most dangerous external crisis” (523). This assertion reeks a bit too much of an old teleology of failure. Yet as Benjamin Elman and others have now begun to argue, the notion of an ‘ineffective’ China is itself a construct of post-1895 modernizing reformers, and belies a robust set of Qing modernization efforts.¹⁰ Moreover, Chosŏn Korea, though far more centralized than Tokugawa Japan, stood in a similarly ambiguous situation of autonomy and vassalage—this time, vis-à-vis Qing suzerainty. Capitalizing on the murkiness of their independence from China, Chosŏn officials in various instances attempted to stall Western imperial powers with performances analogous to Tsushima’s.¹¹ One might therefore legitimately question Shmagin’s article over the extent to which a Tokugawa capacity to respond to external threats really came from the ambiguity of central and local authority—from the ability of wily Japanese actors to perform deference amidst defiance, and thereby convince foreign parties of local willingness to submit, while plotting central resistance.

Within the larger scope of affairs, Japan’s autonomous survival was arguably the product of a different kind of misunderstanding on the part of foreign imperial powers. This misunderstanding cast Japan as a small piece of the global pie, on which less attention and energy was to be lavished. However much the Tokugawa may have cunningly played on outsider ignorance, they were ultimately more the beneficiaries of outsider nonchalance. A richer analysis of putative Chinese and Korean ‘ineffectiveness’ seems here not only salutary, but necessary, in order to prevent us from potentially overestimating the internal strength and uniqueness of the Tokugawa state. These critiques aside, Shmagin’s article offers much to ponder. Rescuing the underexplored impact of Russian naval expeditions on the emergence of modern Japan, Shmagin also provokes us to consider that the puzzle of the Tokugawa polity, far from being a merely archaic hybrid feudalism, was responsible for a dynamism capable of facing the challenges of the modern international order.

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¹⁰ Benjamin A. Elman, “Naval Warfare and the Refraction of China’s Self-Strengthening Reforms into Scientific and Technological failure, 1865-1895,” *Modern Asian Studies* 38:2 (2004): 283-326; Elman, “The ‘Rise’ of Japan and the ‘Fall’ of China after 1895,” in *The Chinese Chameleon Revisited: From the Jesuits to Zhang Yimou* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 143-171; Jing Tsu, *Failure, Nationalism, and Literature: The Making of Modern Chinese Identity, 1895-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

¹¹ See especially Kirk W. Larsen, *Tradition, Treatises, and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Chosŏn Korea, 1850-1910* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

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communication of scientific and medical knowledge between East Asia and Western Europe during the long emergence of global modernity, ca. 1750-1900. At present, he is at work on three main projects: finishing a monograph, *Learn Anything!: Cheap Print and the Education of the Modern World*, editing a volume on the emergence of 'compression' as a virtue in information storage and transmission systems, and beginning a new book on image banks and picture telegraphy. He earned his Ph.D. from Harvard in History and East Asian Languages in 2016.

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