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BOOK REVIEW

China und Japan. Zwei Reiche unter einem Himmel. Eine Geschichte der sino-japanischen Kulturbeziehungen

Kai Vogelsang

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In the last few decades, various approaches have been developed to transcend the traditional boundaries of a historical science that was largely oriented towards nation-states as a result of its founding in the 19th century. These include attempts at a *histoire croisée* (Werner and Zimmermann 2004), an entangled history (Li, Sun, and Gadkar-Wilcox 2019, for instance), or transnational history (with a new *Yearbook of Transnational History*) up to global history (Conrad 2016). Individual regions (Knoll and Scharf 2021), even individual villages (Kaltenbrunner 2017), up to the entire planet are interwoven, for example through global migration flows (see for instance, the series *Studies in Global Migration History*), but also by entanglements through individual commodities (Mintz 1986; Beckert 2014).

In contrast, to write an entangled history of two modern nation states, China and Japan, seems almost traditional. However, the depth of time in this presentation that goes back to the early and pre-state period and the importance of the two cultural areas that Kai Vogelsang focuses on goes far beyond the concepts of nation-state developed in China and Japan only in the last 150 years. Seldom has such an analysis of the political, economic, and, above all, cultural connections within such a large area for more than 2000 years been undertaken by a single scholar.

The motif of “two kingdoms under one sky” forms the red thread along which the “horizons” of China and Japan initially merge (pp. 37–118) – through the adoption of Chinese ideas of statehood and writing, cosmology and literature up to a “Sinicisation” of everyday life in Japan during the Tang Dynasty (7th-9th centuries CE). Afterwards, however, Vogelsang describes a “narrowing of the horizons” (pp. 119–156) both in Japan during the Heian period and in China during the Song dynasty (10th-12th centuries), partly in deliberate differentiation from the sometimes so-called “cosmopolitan” spirit (Lewis 2009) of the Tang period.

“The time of warriors and despots” (13th-18th centuries) even leads to a “lost horizon” (pp. 158–236), which, for the first time since the fighting between Tang and Japanese troops on the Korean peninsula in the 7th century, is tarnished by armed conflicts between the two empires (Mongolian attempts at a conquest of Japan in the 13th century; Japanese invasions of Korea in the Imjin War 1592 to 1598, as a continuation of the

bloody civil wars). The arrival of European seafarers from the 16th century onwards marks a new challenge which the “closed states” of the Qing emperors and the Tokugawa shoguns were trying to meet by restricting the access of foreigners.

These efforts are frustrated, under the title of “Receding Horizons”, by the “onset of modernity” (pp. 238–336), after British ships in the Opium Wars (1839–1842, 1856–1860) forced China to “open up” to the “West” and an American flotilla in 1853/1854 did the same to Japan. But while Japan was undergoing a rapid “modernisation” (industrialisation, militarisation) after the Meiji reforms, the efforts of the Qing Empire remained only piecemeal until the pressure of the European imperialists was intensified by Japanese imperialism, which was even more threatening due to its geographical proximity.

This ultimately resulted in a “Broken Horizon” (pp. 337–420) in the catastrophe of the Japanese war from 1937 to 1945 against China, which could not be re-unified, as a result also of the positioning of the two states in the Cold War and the geopolitical and economic rivalry that continues to this day under the influence of intensifying nationalisms.

Vogelsang’s lucid prose makes the text easy to understand even for non-specialists in Sinology or Japanology (such as this reviewer) and is a joy to read. Individual inserts on selected topics from “Language” (pp. 33–34) via “Calendar” (pp. 59–61) and “Chairs” (pp. 110–112) to “Noodles” (pp. 149–150) also allow for a diachronic view.

Language as the basis of communication is of course a recurring topic of the book; educated Japanese and Chinese, for example, conducted silent “brush conversations” (*bitan/hitsudan*) in literary Chinese up to the 20th century, alternately writing on a piece of paper and handing it back and forth (p. 34). What is astonishing, however, is the extremely limited willingness among the elites, at least for a long time until the 19th century, to learn the languages actually spoken. When the Ming Empire had to deal with the attacks by Japanese pirates, a “Japan Compendium” (*Riben kaolüe*) was created, which mainly adopted the (now outdated) knowledge from older texts, but at

least contained 350 Japanese words in a glossary. Zheng Shangong from Canton compiled a list of as many as 3,399 words after his trip to Japan in 1556 (pp. 202–204), but even with these there was hardly any full access to the idiom of the “other” side. When the novels of the Ming period became popular in Japan in the 17th century, Japanese scholars trained in classical Chinese could not read the texts written in the Chinese vernacular; only with the creation of new glossaries did these books become accessible (pp. 227–228). In view of this complex linguistic basis for exchange, it is not surprising that Vogelsang repeatedly addresses communication limits and disruptions, even in the early days of diplomatic relations, when Queen Suiko of the Yamato dynasty in 607 CE wrote a letter to Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty, suggesting equality between the two rulers, to the indignation of the Chinese court (pp. 41–42); this invites comparison with similar cases in the diplomatic exchanges between the rulers of Afro-Eurasia in these centuries (see Preiser-Kapeller 2018, 76–77).

Another often astonishing phenomenon is the existence of parallel developments and similar rhythms of political dynamics between the two realms. Vogelsang refers to the crises of the 14th century, which were partly initiated by the climatic transformation of the Little Ice Age in China and Japan and contributed to the end of the Kamakura shogunate in 1336 and to the downfall of the Mongolian Yuan dynasty in 1368 (pp. 192–193). Something similar can be observed for the regime changes of the 17th century: “But despite all mutual demarcation, the Qing and the Tokugawa were peculiarly similar: both were parvenus who came to power by force and who had to legitimise themselves against the elites of their country; and both were based on the same model of political legitimation: the Chinese doctrine of Confucianism” (p. 211).

Undoubtedly, until the 19th century, Chinese interest in Japanese culture was less than the other way around. Until the middle of the 19th century, even geographical works about Japan in China were based on tradition and not on current empirical knowledge about the neighbouring country (pp. 241–242). The Japanese, on the other hand, were “not picky, but by no means indiscriminate” when adopting elements of Chinese culture (p. 117). As Vogelsang shows with several examples, the import of Chinese culture into Japan “always led to its transformation, reinterpretation, and criticism (...). The

Japanese built on Chinese culture and at the same time shook its foundations” (p. 219). This process began with a stronger emphasis on independent further development of the adopted elements (“Japanese spirit and Chinese skills” [*wakon kansai*]) after China had lost its function as role model with the collapse of the Tang dynasty at the end of the 9th century (p. 136). The Chinese elites of the Song era, on the other hand, began to distance themselves from all “barbaric” influences, including those from Japan, from the 10th century onwards (p. 121). Japan therefore also preserved elements of the Tang culture (the Chinese “Middle Ages”) that were later destroyed or lost in China itself (pp. 99–100), including the Chinese football game (*cujū/kemari*, p. 113), and in particular “Chinese books” (pp. 189–191). It was not until the Qing period, from the 18th century onwards, that Chinese scholars became increasingly aware that lost classics had been preserved in Japan; at the same time, the textual-criticism methods of the Japanese Confucians opened up a new approach to these texts for both sides (pp. 229–230).

Beyond the fluctuating and sometimes dwindling interest of the elites in both realms, maritime trade remained a constant of material and cultural exchange, despite restrictions or bans. In Japan, especially between 1250 and 1350, imported Chinese coins were even used for payment transactions (pp. 146–157); one could find other comparative cases, such as the wide diffusion of Arab coins in Scandinavia and Western Europe in the 8th to 10th centuries (see most recently Gruszczyński 2020). In the Qing and Edo periods, which were officially characterised by isolation, foreign trade even intensified; several thousand Chinese settled in Nagasaki, enjoying more privileges there than the Dutch (pp. 219–223). In the 17th and 18th centuries, China also still served as a source of technology transfers, such as in bridge building (pp. 224–225).

However, the new scientific methods of the Europeans created more powerful competition for Chinese knowledge traditions in Japan, for example when the dissection of a corpse in 1771 obviously refuted the anatomical speculations of Chinese medicine. “Dutch studies” (*Rangaku*) became the basis of a new science, even before Japan officially “opened” to the West (pp. 233–235; see also Marcon 2015). This was accompanied by a renewed increase in the self-perception of Japan as the actual “cultural

empire of the middle”, which had an uninterrupted line of rulers and had never been subjugated from outside – in contrast to China as a “land of chaos and violence”, where multiple invasions, the latest by the “barbarian” Manchus, had caused great devastation and a supposed loss of culture (pp. 234–236).

Although the defeat of China in the first Opium War (1839–1842) seemed to confirm this disregard, it generated a shock in Japan (pp. 242–243). Once again, injustices in China were discussed as part of a search for the causes for the defeat. The experiences of the Qing also motivated the Japanese government to submit to the US-Americans in 1853/1854 in order not to experience a military fiasco faced with Western weapons technology as China had done (p. 247). Vogelsang vividly describes how the journey of a Japanese delegation to Shanghai on the ship “Senzai-maru” in 1862 was all the more sobering in view of the behaviour of the Europeans there towards the “humiliated” Chinese (pp. 250–252). In order not to share the fate of the Chinese, the Japanese turned to Western knowledge and away from “Asia” (p. 266–270). This went hand in hand with an “orientalisation” of China as backward and despotic (for European models in this regard see Osterhammel 2018), which ultimately led to racist stereotypes and a “dehumanisation” of the Chinese, especially during the first Sino-Japanese war (pp. 281–284).

In turn, the successes of Japanese modernisation and expansion, even if increasingly directed against China, inspired Chinese reform efforts, with the prestige of the Japanese, as in other parts of Asia and the world, peaking after the victory over Russia in 1905. While at first the Chinese, either voluntarily or exiled by their own government, increasingly studied in Japan, and became familiar with the concepts of modern science in Japanese translations (as can be seen, for example, from the numerous relevant loan words in Chinese, p. 319), after the first Sino-Japanese war Japanese instructors (for example for the military and the police) and investors were also invited to China. Preventing the division of China among Western powers seemed to be in Japan’s interest (pp. 289–321). However, this “golden decade” of Sino-Japanese cooperation, as Vogelsang calls it, ended as early as 1908, both as the enthusiasm of Chinese students in Japan dwindled due to experiences of discrimination and as a now more “Chinese

nationalist”-oriented elite focused on the dangers of Japanese imperialism (pp. 321–336). However, as Vogelsang emphasises, the idea of a Chinese nation-state was born among the Chinese circles in Japan (p. 311).

At least the Japanese presence, especially in Shanghai, would remain strong; several hundred Japanese even participated in the revolutionary movement around Sun Yat-sen, which brought about the end of the Qing imperial regime in 1911 (pp. 340–347). For the transmission of communist ideas to China, especially from 1918 onwards, Japan once again proved to be an important mediator through translations (pp. 358–360), while Chinese and Japanese artistic circles in Shanghai worked closely and fruitfully together (pp. 360–371).

A collaboration of a different kind came about when the Japanese occupiers motivated not only the last deposed emperor of the Qing, but also other conservative Chinese who were disappointed by the republic, to participate in the regime in Mǎnzhōuguó from 1932 onwards under the banner of an evocation of common Confucian values (p. 376–380). This was finally followed in 1937 by the Japanese war of aggression against the Chinese heartland with its immeasurable atrocities, discussed by Vogelsang in full (pp. 380–386).

After the Second World War, it was only from 1954 onwards that there was a rapprochement between Japan and the People’s Republic of China, which were now in different world blocs. It intensified, especially economically, from 1972, with the first visit of a Japanese prime minister to China, and in 1978 resulted in the conclusion of a formal peace treaty. According to Deng Xiaoping, his visit to Japan was one of the inspirations for the programme he initiated for the modernisation and economic growth of China, which also became a success thanks to Japanese investment. For the following years up to 1992 Vogelsang speaks of a “peak period of Sino-Japanese relations”, which also reached broader sections of the population, for example through Japanese mass tourism and the popularity of Japanese films in China (pp. 392–408).

After 1992, however, the economic and geopolitical rivalry between the two countries intensified in the face of the “rise” of China. The down-playing of Japanese crimes

during the war in Japanese schoolbooks and the media, or the visits by Japanese politicians to the Yasukuni shrine in Tokyo, led to an outcry among the Chinese public. At the same time, increased Chinese nationalism was supported by the Communist Party in order to increase internal cohesion of the society after the bloodily suppressed protests of 1989. On the other hand, there is still the enormous extent of economic interdependence, the mobility of millions of tourists between neighbouring countries, and the popularity of Japanese popular culture (manga, music) in China (pp. 408–418). In contrast to the sabre-rattling of modern nationalistic narratives, Vogelsang emphasises the usually exceptionally (for two neighbours) peaceful character of Sino-Japanese relations up to the 19th century (p. 238).

The last part of the book consists of an appendix, including notes to chapters (pp. 421–464), a list of primary sources (pp. 465–470) and secondary sources (pp. 471–490) as well as an index (pp. 491–504) and acknowledgements (S. 505).

Kai Vogelsang's book leaves little to be desired. Perhaps with the focus on the two great realms of China and Japan, the continued importance of Korea for the mediation of cultural exchange, even after antiquity, sometimes takes a backseat (see, for instance, Rawski 2015). The different natural and institutional preconditions of the two countries for industrialisation in the 19th century could have been highlighted in the light of more recent studies (such as Vries 2019). Overall, however, Vogelsang's book is a paradigmatic masterpiece for a complex multi-layered history of entanglements in their *longue durée*, in this case in East Asia, which hopefully will soon be translated into English as well as into Chinese and Japanese – in order to interest wider circles in the deep historical dimension of mutual networks.

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