

# Introduction

UYAMA Tomohiko

This volume is a collection of selected papers presented at the international symposium “Comparing Modern Empires: Imperial Rule and Decolonization in the Changing World Order,” held at the Slavic Research Center (currently Slavic-Eurasian Research Center) of Hokkaido University on January 19–20, 2012. The organizer of this symposium was Group 4 of the project “Comparative Research on Major Regional Powers in Eurasia,” which was conducted from December 2008 to March 2012, having received a grant-in-aid for scientific research on innovative areas (JP20101005) from the Japanese Ministry of Education and Science. The aim of the project was to make a comprehensive comparison of major regional powers in Eurasia, especially Russia, China, and India, the three countries that are rapidly enhancing their influence in today’s world.

Group 4 studied history. China, India, and Russia are sometimes called new or rising powers, but they have a rich history, even more ancient than many other powers. Their modern history is related to empires, albeit in different ways. Russia in the nineteenth century was a militarily and politically powerful empire, though culturally and economically backward by European standards. In the next century, it was transformed into a multinational socialist country, sometimes called the “Soviet empire,” which ultimately dissolved into fifteen countries. China was itself an old empire but suffered encroachment by foreign imperialist forces in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its socialist successor still retains most of the territory of the Qing Empire. India was formerly ruled by the Mughal Empire, but its modern history was

framed by its status as a colony of the British Empire and the struggle for independence and decolonization. Naturally, these countries have not existed in isolation but have interacted with other empires, semi-empires, nation-states, and colonies in the worldwide international system; therefore, we did not limit ourselves to studying the three countries, but also studied the Ottoman Empire, Japan, Iran, and other countries. One of the crucial players in the modern and current international politics, the so-called “American empire,” was another important research subject for Group 4.<sup>1</sup>

As empire is an ancient form of polity, one may wonder why we compared only modern empires. While not denying the necessity of studying the long history of each empire, we can point out features of modern empires that should be studied distinctively from premodern empires. First, unlike ancient empires, which were first and foremost supreme powers in a particular region and did not necessarily closely interact with other empires, modern empires have always contested or cooperated with each other. Second, empires and nation-states have coexisted, competed, and complemented each other as two state models in the modern world. Third, empire as a conservative form of polity has nonetheless been faced with the necessity of modernization and reform, and the combination of conservatism and modernism has often created situations unseen in premodern empires.

Historiography of each empire has its own tradition, but we can observe some conversion in recent studies of imperial history. The study of the British Empire is arguably the richest in methods and approaches, and in particular, has long paid attention to the interaction between metropolis and colony, especially the importance of non-European local actors in the formation of European empires (see Chapter 4). In the field of study of the Qing Empire, scholars have become increasingly

---

<sup>1</sup> The core results of the research by Group 4 were published in Japanese: Uyama Tomohiko, ed., *Yūrashia kindai teikoku to gendai sekai* [Modern Eurasian empires and today's world] (Kyoto: Minerva shobō, 2016). Some preliminary results were earlier published in English: Uyama Tomohiko, ed., *Empire and After: Essays in Comparative Imperial and Decolonization Studies* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2012).

conscious that this empire was not simply a Chinese dynasty, but was based on a multifaceted legitimacy that combined traditions of the Chinese and Mongol Empires as well as Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> The history of the Russian Empire was, until the early 1990s, written predominantly as the history of tsars and ethnic Russian society, but since then the study of the geographic structure of imperial administration and relationships between imperial power and non-Russian peoples has greatly progressed.<sup>3</sup> Overall, researchers of these empires have been elucidating the interaction between state and society, the intertwist of universalism and particularism, the combination of oppression and tolerance, and the correlation between imperial knowledge and prejudice. The focus of their interest is, in short, the “politics of difference”—defining, creating, governing, and manipulating differences among various ethnic, religious, and regional groups, with the intention of strengthening the state’s power over a diverse population but sometimes leading to an opposite result.

This volume also shares the above-mentioned research interests, and in addition, attaches importance to international contexts of interactions among empires as well as between metropolis and periphery. It consists of eight chapters, each of which deals with at least two of the follow-

---

2 The research trend called the New Qing History, which puts emphasis on the Inner Asian (Central Eurasian) character of the Qing Empire relying on the analysis of Manchu and other non-Han language sources, has gained prominence in the United States since the mid-1990s. See James A. Millward et al., eds., *New Qing Imperial History: The Making of Inner Asian Empire at Qing Chengde* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004). The long tradition of Japanese scholarship in studying Manchu and Mongolian sources has constituted a part of the basis of this trend.

3 See, for example, Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzarini, eds., *Russia’s Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700–1917* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Jane Burbank, Mark von Hagen, and Anatolyi Remnev, eds., *Russian Empire: Space, People, Power, 1700–1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Matsuzato Kimitaka, ed., *Imperiology: From Empirical Knowledge to Discussing the Russian Empire* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2007); Uyama Tomohiko, ed., *Asiatic Russia: Imperial Power in Regional and International Contexts* (London: Routledge, 2012).

ing subjects: strengths and weaknesses of empire; boundaries between empire and other types of states; the various ways of governing different peoples and the roles of intermediaries, collaborators, and rebels; the impact of modernity on empires and their ambiguous roles in modernization; the center-periphery and metropolis-colony relationships, including the questions of autonomy, and its persistence in the postcolonial/neocolonial era; the process of decolonization, especially its interactions with the Cold War logic, related to the new imperialist rivalry between capitalist and socialist powers. Most of the chapters focus on a particular empire or region but place it in the broader contexts of world history, occasionally comparing it with other empires and regions.

In the first chapter, Jane Burbank, the coauthor of a fundamental general work on imperial history,<sup>4</sup> sheds light on the strengths and weaknesses of empire as a form of polity, tracing the trajectories of different imperial states. Empires are agents of transformation of the world, capable of adjusting themselves to changes, but they are also subject to fission, reconfiguration, and collapse. As one of the major challenges for them is exercising power from a distance and over diverse populations, they have developed varied repertoires of power to govern different people differently, often relying on intermediaries. Further, Burbank neatly explains the relationships between imperial rule and decolonization. The independence of some British colonies in the eighteenth century did not destroy the British Empire and may have made it more manageable. For much of the nineteenth century and beyond, empires helped to make nations on other empires' territories. Even after World War II, empires tried to modernize imperialism, but their attempts unexpectedly led to situations where they willingly or unwillingly divested themselves of colonies.

Rudi Matthee's Chapter 2 deals with Safavid Iran, a premodern state that some regard as an empire and others do not. Being a composite state of multiple identities with a central political power and a dominant (although not absolute) religion, language, and culture, Safavid Iran well fits the usual definition of an empire, but it was constantly faced

---

<sup>4</sup> Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

with centrifugal forces that made this empire vulnerable. Although the Safavids had a strong mobilizing power both ideologically and militarily, they could not, unlike the Ottomans and the Mughals, sever the connection between tribal power and military power, and were unable to exercise a monopoly of violence. Thus, Matthee argues, Safavid Iran was not a “gunpowder empire,” as it is often labelled together with the Ottoman and Mughal Empires, but a patrimonial-bureaucratic state, where personal relationships and monetary inducement constituted the basis of power structure. Local rulers paid tribute to the Safavids to demonstrate their loyalty, while the central government gave rewards to tribal chiefs to ensure their collaboration. Such reciprocal relationships were sometimes formed also in relation to foreigners. Thus, Safavid Iran was a fragile but lively forum for perpetual negotiation and bargaining. These findings by Matthee indicate that although Safavid Iran as a tributary state was clearly a premodern empire, the dynamic interaction between its state and society and the difficulties it encountered in conducting the “politics of difference” had much in common with modern empires.

Maria Misra (Chapter 3) takes up the contentious question of the relationship between empire and modernity in the case of British India. She argues that after the British in India lost faith in optimistic liberalism as a result of the Rebellion of 1857–58, official policy adopted a strategy of “conservative modernization,” combining a Romantic paternalism with an authoritarian liberalism. This policy change, which promoted aristocratic groups and values in the hope that they would act as agents of economic and technological development, took place in a broader context of international economic and geopolitical change that stimulated interest in elite-led conservative projects of modernization in Bismarckian Germany and Meiji Japan. In directly ruled British India, the conservative modernization strategy did not prove effective, due to the continuing conflict between liberals and conservatives over which Indian groups made the best collaborators and, moreover, because of a strong reliance on the white middle class. In contrast, it was more successful in princely India, where maharajas and other princes were willing to promote modern good governance, in which they saw no contradiction with the traditional idea of a king as a provider of welfare. The British incorporated these Indian aristocrats and “gentlemen” into an integrated

hierarchy with the Queen Empress at the top. The policy of conservative modernization succeeded in building a more stable relationship with collaborators than in Safavid Iran, but it also represented another example of the contradictory “politics of difference,” which exacerbated the difference between directly ruled British India and numerous princely states.

Uyama Tomohiko’s Chapter 4 focuses on Central Asia, a region famous for being the theater of the “Great Game,” and tries to elucidate what imperial expansion, rule, and rivalry meant for the local people. The chapter analyses historical events that occurred in various places such as Kazakhstan, West and East Turkestan, Pamirs, Hunza, and Kashmir, and makes a number of findings on the dynamics of center-periphery and metropolis-colony relationships. First, in a situation of antagonism among local actors, the intention of one party to ally with a great power to defeat the adversary often led to imperial expansion. In the short run, local actors were able to use the empire and even to twist it around their little fingers, but in the long run, their intentions backfired, and they were subjugated by the empire. Second, when their independence was threatened by a larger country, small countries often tried to enlist the help of another large country or empire by exploiting rivalries among them. Empires used these small countries as pawns in certain situations, but could easily abandon them, giving priority to maintaining the international order of the great powers. Third, as long as imperial rule brought justice and stability, more people chose adaptation and collaboration rather than resistance, but the rulers’ distrust and misgivings sometimes alienated them. Resistance and collaboration were interchangeable strategies for the local people. Fourth, colonized people’s attitudes toward empires diverged in the course of modernization. The ability or inability of an empire to provide cultural and political models and opportunities could determine colonized people’s attitudes toward the empire.

The early twentieth century saw the decline of many empires, but some of them regenerated as new states, and we can observe change and continuity between them. In Chapter 5, Ikeda Yoshiro tackles the often posed but difficult to solve question on the continuity between the Russian Empire and the USSR as a multinational state by examining various ideas of autonomy in the late tsarist and early Soviet periods. He

focuses, among others, on the prominent liberal jurist Fedor Kokoshkin, who studied under Georg Jellinek in Heidelberg. Kokoshkin strictly distinguished between autonomy and self-government and admitted cultural autonomy while approving the territorial autonomy only of Poland and Finland but opposing the federalization of Russia. His theory and view heavily influenced the nationalities policy of the Kadet party. Some other jurists regarded the British Empire as an ideal model of empire that tamed imperial diversity by giving autonomy to its Dominions and motivating them to help the metropolis. After the February Revolution in 1917, the development of national movements pursuing maximum autonomy and federalization quickly outmoded the idea of Kokoshkin and other mainstream Kadets, who still tried to hamper this trend. After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks coopted some parts of national movements, and established a standardized system of national republics. This standardization was effective for mobilization of the population in the era of total war, making a contrast with the particularistic approach of the tsarist authorities and the Kadets toward nationalities. However, the power of national republics was restricted and regulated by the metropolis, and the center-periphery relationship retained imperial features. Thus, Ikeda argues, the Soviet Union was an “empire of republics,” an empire upgraded in accordance with the age of total war, revolution, and nationalism.

We proceed to the post-WWII period in the next two chapters. Kan Hideki (Chapter 6) analyzes the complex interactions of the three major trends in the early Cold War period, namely, colonialism, anti-colonial nationalism, and the US logic of the Cold War, in the context of the US attempt to construct an informal American empire. Examining US responses to decolonization in Malaya during the Emergency and in the Middle East during the Suez Crisis, he found that as long as old colonial powers, principally the British, could fulfill their responsibility to contain communism in their former colonies, the United States made them important collaborators. However, when the British influence declined and powerful anti-Western (and in some cases pro-Soviet) nationalism emerged, the United States took over the responsibility. This could sometimes result in US showing consideration for world opinion and nationalism and restraining British and French imperialism, as was the case with

the Suez Crisis. In other cases, however, the United States resorted to military force to protect strategically important regions against communism in a way no different from British imperialist behavior. Although the Washington policymakers sometimes used anti-colonial rhetoric, they prioritized the dictates of the Cold War.

Qiang Zhai in Chapter 7 examines the interaction between the Cold War and decolonization, featuring the opposite (socialist) camp of the Cold War, especially China. Right after coming to power in 1949, the Chinese Communists displayed enthusiasm in supporting communist rebellions in Southeast Asia and showed hostility toward neutralist governments of newly independent states, such as India and Burma. Stalin, however, considered armed revolutions in India and other countries premature, and restrained the Chinese Communists. In 1954, China and India declared the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which Mao Zedong intended to apply to China's relations with all countries. This Chinese policy harmonized with Khrushchev's active diplomacy in the Third World. The Bandung Conference of Asian and African states in 1955 was a culmination of the Sino-Soviet "peace offensive" and greatly improved China's international image, especially in the Third World. This state of affairs forced the United States and Great Britain to take more flexible attitudes toward decolonization, and the Soviet Union and China interpreted the British and French withdrawal from Egypt after the Suez Crisis in this light. However, Sino-Soviet joint efforts in showing solidarity with the Third World were short-lived, and Mao soon switched to a more radical and militant direction in his domestic and foreign policies.

Comparing Chapters 6 and 7, we find that many uncertainties accompanied the hegemonic transition and great power rivalry in the post-WWII world. The power transition from the British Empire to the United States proceeded step by step, depending on situations in regions, while the behavior of new socialist powers, the Soviet Union and communist China, was energetic but unpredictable, depending on the personality and will of their leaders. Nationalism in colonies and postcolonial countries was a crucial factor in the relations among all these powers.

After years of confusion that culminated in the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), China carried out reforms in the late twentieth century and emerged as a world great power in the twenty-first

century. In the final chapter, Tsai Tung-Chieh offers a review of Chinese history from ancient times to the present from the point of view of imperial history. In contrast to the tendency of traditional historians to treat Chinese history as a series of dynastic alternations, Tsai examines how China has switched among imperial policy, imperializing policy, and status quo policy, and distinguishes three periods of culmination of empire building. The First Empire (from Qin to Han) gradually developed imperial and cosmopolitan concepts, while the Second Empire (the Sui-Tang period), under the constant pressure of nomads, took a more accommodating stance to threatening forces. The Third Empire, Qing, successfully controlled different regions by adopting hybrid ethnic policies, but was confronted with the challenge of the European-led world enlargement, which eventually led to the collapse of the Qing. Even after the establishment of communist rule, China pursued a non-imperialist status quo policy for a long time, but after the 1990s, it entered another historic period of imperializing policy. Still, China preserves its eternal principle of “domestic politics first, then foreign policy,” and according to Tsai’s observation, remains a long way off from rebuilding an empire despite the occasional demonstration of aggressiveness.

The chapters of this volume show that empires constantly referred to experiences of other empires (including their own predecessors) and observed others’ reactions to their own policy in constructing relations with smaller countries and colonies. As Ann Laura Stoler argues by using the phrase “politics of comparison,”<sup>5</sup> it is more fruitful to analyze political acts of comparison by empires themselves than to search for static differences among empires, which are often conceived as differences of a mythical “national character.” Discovering the dynamics of mutual comparison and reaction is the core of comparative imperial studies, and it gives us many suggestions for analyzing relationships between larger states/nations and smaller ones both in history and today’s world.

The editing of this volume was interrupted several times due to unforeseen circumstances, and a long time has passed since the symposium

---

5 Ann Laura Stoler and Carole McGranahan, “Introduction: Refiguring Imperial Terrains,” in Stoler, McGranahan, and Peter C. Perdue, eds., *Imperial Formations* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007), pp. 13–15.

sium was held. I sincerely apologize to the contributors and readers for the delay in publication, but believe that the chapters have not become outdated at all and continue to be useful for the further study of history and understanding of today's world. The delay has also brought at least one benefit. After the end of the above-mentioned project on major regional powers in Eurasia, I continued to study imperial history in a project called "Comparative Colonial History: Colonial Administration and Center-Periphery Interactions in Modern Empires" (JSPS grant-in-aid for scientific research A, JP 25244025, 2013–2018). The knowledge and views acquired from this project were useful to editing this volume and writing the introduction.