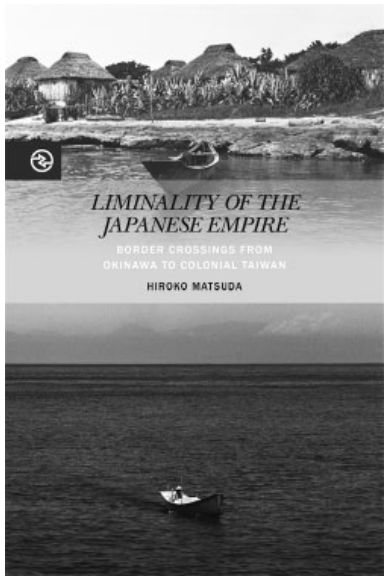
Book review: *Liminality of the Japanese Empire: Border Crossing from Okinawa to Colonial Taiwan*, by Hiroko Matsuda (University of Hawai'i Press, 2019).



Liminality of the Japanese Empire should be considered one of the most exciting new books on transnational history this year. Matsuda's thorough historical investigation and her meticulous ethnographic work has yielded a powerful narrative that significantly contributes to the broadening of quite a few horizons within several academic fields of study. First and foremost, Matsuda has succeeded, beautifully, in situating the transnational history of the Japanese Empire in the 19th and 20th centuries into the broader context of global history. This is the way transnational history should be done. *Liminality of the Japanese Empire* demonstrates how the transnational history of the Japanese Empire is not simply about Japanese imperialist expansion from the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) to the conclusion of the Second World War. Because history is not just about war and the decisions of great men and the nation is involved much more than its government, the transnational history of the Japanese Empire has a significant portion that is about overseas migration of subjects of the Japanese Empire, the rise of overseas Japanese communities across the Pacific and in both North and South America, as well as how the Japanese diaspora contributed to the development of the host countries and influenced relations between the Japanese Empire and those countries.

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Secondly, *Liminality of the Japanese Empire* manages to construct a transnational narrative of the history of the overseas Japanese by questioning the readers' basic assumptions about the definition of basic political terms, such as, the empire, the nation-state and citizenship. Why and since when was Okinawa considered a part of the Japanese nation? If, indeed, it was an integral part of the Japanese nation, why has its native population been discriminated against as not truly Japanese or been called the "other Japanese" through much of the modern era? Furthermore, if Okinawa should be considered to be a marginalized remote corner of the empire/nation-state of Japan—as has been considered by many historians of the Japanese nation in earlier periods—how do we start to understand the relationship between migrants from Okinawa to Taiwan during the colonial period (from 1895 to the conclusion of the Second World War)? What kind of a relationship did the Japanese Empire have with each of its different colonies and what kind of relationship did colonies like Taiwan have with people, officials and military officers from different parts of the Japanese Empire? In searching for the answers to all these questions, Matsuda has managed to give us an interesting new perspective on the identity politics of what it really means to be Japanese, from the perception of the marginalized Okinawan migrant acting out as a second-class colonizer in a first-class colony such as Taiwan in the late-1930s.

Thirdly, *Liminality of the Japanese Empire* problematizes the status of Okinawa within the Japanese Empire and later within the postwar Japanese nation-state as much as it problematizes the status of Taiwan, both as a colony and a nation-state. This book is a must-read for Taiwan studies just as much as it is for scholars of the transnational history of the Japanese Empire. For how long and just how intensely was Formosa Island under the suzerainty of the Great Qing Empire before it was forced to relinquish the island to Japan following the conclusion of the First Sino-Japanese War? How much did Taiwan residents feel that they were a part of the Japanese Empire in the 50 years when they were technically under Japanese rule? Finally, if Okinawan migrants to Taiwan felt that they learned to become more Japanese in Taiwan, could we conclude that Taiwan was more a part of the Japanese Empire than Okinawa during the colonial period? The answers to all these questions, which readers can find in *Liminality of the Japanese*

Empire, allows us to contemplate more profoundly and question more intensely our preexisting perceptions of the Japanese national identity, the Okinawan identity and the Taiwanese identity from the colonial period up to the present in the post-Cold War period.

There is nothing really lacking from Matsuda's comprehensive narrative of *Liminality of the Japanese Empire*, however, one area that seems to receive less attention and would tend to pique the readers' curiosity and, hopefully, lead to further research, is the US role in all of this. It is clear that the main focus of *Liminality of the Japanese Empire* is on the relationship between the so-called mainland Japanese islands and Okinawa, the relationship between Okinawa and Taiwan under Japanese rule and the challenges to the definition of empire, nation-state, citizenship and the sense of belonging. However, it is also quite obvious that the US was fundamentally involved in transforming Japan from an early-20th century empire to a post-Second World War nation-state deprived of the right to have a military and the right to declare war. The US military presence in Okinawa since the conclusion of the War has also been an important obstacle in the way of fully assimilating these islands into the rest of the Japanese nation-state. Also, the most glaring presence of the US in this area of the world is the continued existence of Taiwan as an entity outside of the People's Republic of China throughout the Cold War and up to the present day. *Liminality of the Japanese Empire* does discuss US involvement quite a bit, especially in the parts relating to Okinawa, but there is much more that could be done from the perspective of the external superpower influence on the other two nation-state players in this narrative, Japan and Taiwan, in the postwar years. Perhaps this is for a different book altogether but this small gap in the narrative of *Liminality of the Japanese Empire*, at least, allows us to become aware of how so much more could and needs to be done in terms of taking the transnational history of this part of the world out of the rigid confines of nationalist history or area studies and into the more inclusive and aware realm of global history.

Finally, as someone who has been working mostly on the Chinese diaspora, I celebrate the emergence of such a work by a Japanese scholar like Matsuda. This is because most of the scholarship on the overseas Chinese that has been done in the past decades has tended to project the Chinese diaspora simply as an extension of the Chinese

nation-state. Consequently, conferences and publications on the history of the overseas Chinese have often been limited to internal dialogues only among historians of the Chinese nation or specifically among researchers or overseas Chinese history, and therefore, have not resulted in any form of transnational narrative at all. *Liminality of the Japanese Empire* tackles the subject of the overseas Japanese from a perspective that allows it to be discussed as a truly transnational narrative. Matsuda does this by challenging the traditional understanding of the limits of the empire, various forms of national boundaries and the wide array of possible definitions of citizenship. This allows *Liminality of the Japanese Empire* to be in conversation with all sorts of works on transnational history. The same questions on limits, boundaries and national belongings that Matsuda raises with the overseas Japanese in her own work could be posed to many other modern nation-states with a sizable diaspora/overseas community in the 19th and 20th centuries. It is field shaping works like *Liminality of the Japanese Empire* that encourage historians of the transnational—the histories of the overseas Chinese, Non-Residential Indians, Okinawan Japanese migrants, and so on—to engage and learn more from each other. This book is an inspiration for transnational and global historians of our day. It is a good reminder that there is so much more that could be done to broaden our perspective and deepen our understanding of history in the globalized age. There is still much more that needs to be done before we can truly liberate our histories—especially Asian histories—from the rigid confines of national and regional histories and area studies.

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