

H-Net Reviews

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Sally M. Miller, A.J.H. Latham, Dennis O. Flynn, eds. *Studies in the Economic History of the Pacific Rim*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998. xiv + 253 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-14819-1.

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In the introduction to this volume, Dennis Flynn and Arturo Giraldez write that they searched “for books and articles which might provide an overview of over four centuries of Pacific Rim interchange. For years scholars around the world have given the same answer: no long-term overview of the Pacific Rim exists in any language.” Since the failure by economic historians “to acknowledge an over 420-year trade relationship covering one third of the globe’s surface seemed like a glaring omission,” the editors and the University of the Pacific decided to sponsor “the world’s first conference on Pacific Rim History” in May 1994 (p. 3). The fourteen papers in this edited volume are drawn from the papers presented at that conference.

In his essay “No Empty Ocean,” Paul D’Arcy sets the tone for the volume by observing that few scholars “have attempted to construct an image of the Pacific Ocean as a coherent entity in the way that Fernand Braudel has for the Mediterranean or K.N. Chaudhuri has for the Indian Ocean” (p. 21). Anthony Reid has, however, made a notable start for a corner of the Pacific with his excellent two-volume (1988, 1993) study of trade and growth in Southeast Asia from 1450 to 1680. D’Arcy’s observation raises, however, an important question for this volume: Is building a coherent image of the “Pacific Rim” a more quixotic enterprise than those undertaken by Braudel or Chaudhuri?

These are some reasons to think so, at least prior to World War II. First, the Pacific Ocean is surely a good organizing principle for a geographic region, but economies that are part of a geographic region may not be part of the same economic region unless they are linked by significant trade, investment, or migratory flows. Yet many economies in the Pacific Rim have for long periods engaged in little foreign trade or traded only with their proximate neighbors. Japan’s government heavily restricted foreign trade during the Tokugawa period until Admiral Perry’s black ships opened Japanese ports in the 1850s. Korea had similar trade poli-

cies until Japanese military pressure along the lines of the American model forced open foreign trade in the 1870s. Before western contact in 1778, Hawaii had no regular trade with other Pacific cultures due to its geographic isolation in the North Pacific and risky maritime technologies for sailing to distant countries.

Second, several essays in this volume highlight the important diffusion of ideas, technologies, flora, fauna, and disease that brought Asia-Pacific societies into contact with one another. Until the 1760s this diffusion was often the result of sporadic or accidental contacts rather than the result of ongoing trade, investment, or migratory flows. Although these spillovers linked many societies within the Pacific Ocean in a path-dependent fashion, the lack of regular contacts often precluded the specialization, trade, and deeper cultural exchanges that serve to link societies into a larger regional economy, polity, and culture.

Third, scholarly work on trade in the Pacific Ocean can only be productive if it is founded upon historical or archaeological records of trade. A.J.H. Latham’s essay, “The Reconstruction of Hong Kong Nineteenth-Century Pacific Trade Statistics,” provides a good example of the careful research needed to construct fundamental data series. Latham’s essay highlights the under-use of colonial records for Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Burma. The extensive efforts undertaken to document colonial data in Indonesia cry out to be undertaken for other colonial regimes. (See the fifteen-volume *Changing Economy of Indonesia* series.) While several major research projects dedicated to building historical data on critical economic variables in East and Southeast Asia are now underway, such efforts need to be much higher on the research agendas for historians and economic historians studying Pacific Rim trade.

With the lofty aim of producing a history of trade in the Pacific Rim over the last four hundred years, the volume opens with eight “overview” essays summarizing various aspects of the interaction between Pacific Rim

economies. Essays by Paul D'Arcy ("No Empty Ocean: Trade and Interaction across the Pacific Ocean to the Middle of the Eighteenth Century"), Lionel Frost ("Coming Full Circle: A Long-Term Perspective on the Pacific Rim"), David Chappell ("Peripheralizing the Center: An Historical Overview of Pacific Island Micro-States"), John McNeill ("From Magellan to MITI: Pacific Rim Economies and Pacific Island Ecologies Since 1521"), Arthur P. Dudden ("The American Pacific: Where the West Was Also Won"), Annick Fouquier ("The French Presence in the Pacific Ocean and California, 1700-1850"), and Douglas Daigle ("Environmental Impacts of the Pacific Rim Timber Trade: An Overview") raise, however, questions about the intended audience for the book. While these essays provide competent, brief surveys of the existing literatures, they break little new ground and, due to their brevity and enormous scope, are not sufficiently exhaustive or critical to focus other economic historians and historians on vital research questions at the frontier of these fields. Instead, the essays seem directed to a more general readership requiring only a brief introduction to each topic.

The other seven essays are more narrowly focused on country-specific industries and institutions significantly related to international trade. Karen Clay's creative essay ("Trade, Institutions, and Law: The Experience of Mexican California") nicely applies Avner Greif's theory of merchant coalitions to California merchants engaged in international trade. Tsu-yu Chen ("The Development of the Coal Mining Industry in Taiwan during the Japanese Colonial Occupation") assembles output and export data covering Taiwan's coal mining industry but only begins the task of relating industry behavior to Japanese government policies on energy in the 1920s and 1930s. Frank King ("British Overseas Banking on the Pacific Rim, 1830-1870") provides a detailed essay on the development of British banking in Asia and briefly discusses how the banking institutions facilitated regional trade. David St. Clair ("California Quicksilver in the Pacific Rim Economy, 1850-90") provides an interesting analysis of U.S. exports of quicksilver to China. And R. Bin Wong's suggestive essay ("Chinese Views of the Money Supply and Foreign Trade, 1400-1850") contrasts Chinese attitudes

towards amassing large sums of bullion with Western attitudes and in the process raises more questions than the very brief treatment can answer.

The editors rightly suggest (p. 17) that understanding the powerful influence of China on Asia-Pacific trade should be a central focus of future research. For more than a century after 1571 China, imported fifty tons of silver annually from Spanish colonies in the Americas, thereby providing ongoing linkages between China, the Americas, and Europe (if not between China and other Pacific Rim economies). The sheer magnitude of China's silver imports reinforces new research on China's living standards. Ken Pomeranz (1997) has recently argued that eighteenth century living standards in the lower Yangtze region of China were roughly comparable to those observed in England and the Low Countries. With its high per capita income and high population, China's trade with other Asia-Pacific societies is central to any discussion of Pacific Rim trade between 1500 and 1850 and needs much more careful examination by scholars.

The essays in this volume provide the interested reader with brief overviews of trade between various Asia-Pacific economies, but, as the editors acknowledge, "most of the work [on this topic] remains to be done" (p. 17). A core research agenda focused on careful assembly of fundamental data on Asia-Pacific economies from under-exploited archival and archeological sources is the key to future progress.

References

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