H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

*The Asia-Pacific Maritime World: Connected Histories in the Age of Empire.* Heidelberg: Heidelberg University, Project C12, 06.07.2012-08.07.2012.

**Reviewed by** Martin Dusinberre

**Published on** H-Soz-u-Kult (October, 2012)

The aim of this conference was to question the ways in which scholars tend to divide the maritime world into spatial blocs like the 'Atlantic World', the concept of 'Mediterranean' blocs, etc. Instead, we wanted to focus on the nature of maritime connections between two maritime spheres: the 'Pacific' world and a space that is often characterized by scholars of the pre-modern period as the 'East Asian Mediterranean'.

By placing East Asia in a wider Pacific context, one that reflects the reality of steamships beginning to cross greater distances with relative ease, we hoped to broaden our understanding of the ways in which maritime space was both imagined and lived during the long nineteenth century. Thus, instead of focusing on land-based issues such as extraterritoriality, we wanted to examine the relationship between ports and new maritime networks, so as to develop a more fluid, comparative sense of shifting East Asian-Pacific sovereignties in this period. Drawing on the new maritime history of the British Empire and concepts of a 'British Sea', of 'home' on the water and of the naval 'theatre' we wanted to consider the relationship between ships, the sea and the East Asian/Western imperial imagination. To complement our focus on sovereignty and imagination, we planned also to examine the significance of the increasing numbers of goods, peoples and even diseases crossing between and within East Asia and the Pacific. In short, we hoped to ask how does the categorization of 'Asian' and 'Pacific' maritime blocs in this period change when we attempt to write connected histories 'on' as well as 'of' the sea?

The conference opened with introductory remarks by organizer MARTIN DUSINBERRE (Newcastle/Heidelberg), who expressed skepticism with our post-Braudelian urge to label every seascape 'Mediterranean' in some way or another. To label particular spaces in this way—including the label, 'Asian Sea'—is to ask the wrong question, referring back to the distinction between histories 'of' and 'on' the seas. Quoting the recent work of Paul Kramer (2011) Paul A. Kramer, Review Essay: Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World; in: American Historical Review, December 2011. , who suggests that '[a] language of the "imperial" rather than "empire" can help avoid connotations of unity and coherence—thingness—that tend to adhere to the latter term…', Dusinberre said that by the same logic, a language of 'maritime' (an adjective) rather than of a particular 'sea' (a noun) would help scholars avoid the implied unity and coherence of an 'Asian Sea' or seas. Nevertheless, for practical purposes it was necessary to have some kind of geographical frame on the discussion, and therefore the focus on Asia-Pacific interactions was one way of trying to go beyond the Asia-Europe focus of the Cluster so as to offer a truly

'global context' for the history of the nineteenth century.

In the first panel, papers were presented by RONALD CHUNG-YAM PO (Heidelberg), CHI KONG LAI (Queensland), and ROTEM KOWNER (Haifa). In different ways, each paper explored the relationship between the state and the sea, be it the extent to which the High Qing distinction between 'inner' and 'outer' sea-spaces was challenged by the arrival of European gunboats and the treaty port system (Po), or the strategies by which the late Qing responded to European commercial interests in East Asia through the establishment of new steamship companies (Lai). Kowner's paper offered important macro-historical perspective on these and other issues with his discussion of rival imperial strategies within Asia and the Pacific Ocean more generally in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Commentator JOACHIM KURTZ (Heidelberg) questioned where the boundary between 'inner' and 'outer' seas might have lain and how it might have changed across time. More broadly, he wondered whether there was anything particularly uniquely Chinese to this conception of maritime space, or whether it couldn't also be applied to European interests in Asia and Euro-American interests in the Pacific.

The second panel shifted from macro- to micro-history, with a focus on three different sea voyages in the 1860s and 1870s: JOSHUA FOGEL (York, Canada) examined the Japanese expedition to Shanghai in 1862 and in particular the ways in which the newly 'opened' Japan gained new knowledge about the outside world from their Chinese interlocutors through, conversely, the 'old' literary forms of ***kanbun***. GAVIN CAMPBELL (Kyoto) focused on the voyages of Niijima Jo to the USA in 1864. Campbell traced the ways in which Niijima's experiences on ship became a prism for his first knowledge of the outside world; yet for all that the ***Wild Rover*** represented great technological advancement to Niijima, the ship was in fact part of a dying breed of clippers traversing the Pacific, a sign that the USA was beginning to fall behind to the technological advances of Europe even as it also was tearing itself apart in civil war. The representation of such technological progress in prose and images formed the focus of CINDY MC CREERY´s (Sydney) paper. She traced local responses to the naval tours of Prince Alfred between 1867 and 1871. This paper particularly examined 'loyal addresses' to Alfred and the HMS ***Galatea*** from British colonial subjects in the South Pacific, arguing that Alfred's arrival offered a chance for the host communities to fashion for themselves a narrative of historical identity and local achievement.

Martin Hoffman (Heidelberg) highlighted in his comment the constant tensions between the ideals of international relations and their reality: such a micro-historical approach helps scholars understand the complex daily negotiations that took place on board and at the pier as imperial and non-imperial regimes encountered each other in the Asia-Pacific region during this period.

At the beginning of the third session LISA HELLMAN (Stockholm) analysed spatial relations in late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century Canton, focusing on different arenas of interaction between 'East' and 'West', including the trading factories, the space of the ship, the significance of water in the port, and the role of women. MIO WAKITA (Heidelberg) examined the iconography of Yokohama and Japan through the work of photography studios that targeted western consumers on their arrival in the treaty port. Tracing the ways in which such imagery changed across the second half of the nineteenth century, she argued that Yokohama was in many ways disconnected from the rest of Japan. HARALD FUESS (Heidelberg) offered a legal perspective on the issue of port space by discussing the ways in which the foreign community in Yokohama responded to the problem of shipwrecks. Fuess argued that we should try to see Yokohama less as an off-shoot of Tokyo, as it is often represented in the historical

literature, and more as a truly Asia-Pacific port. The final paper of the session was given by Wayne Patterson (St. Norbert College), who discussed the Korean port of Pusan. Patterson focused on the ways in which Great Power relations played themselves out in Pusan in the 1880s, offering a salutary reminder of the extent to which important decisions concerning the governance of the treaty ports often lay in the hands of a small number of male administrators. Commentary on the panel was provided by MADELEINE HERREN-OESCH (Heidelberg), who posed the difficult and crucial question, what is it that makes a port a port—that is, were the four papers really concerned with ports per se, or were they actually describing cities more generally?

The fourth panel addressed the appearance of steamships in Asia-Pacific waters. ROBERT ANTONY (Macau) examined the ways in which pirate communities based on the coast of southern China adapted their tactics to the increasing number of steamships in the China Seas. Like the other speakers in this panel, Antony blurred the distinction between 'land' and 'sea' society by pointing out that most of the pirates were Chinese fishermen or sailors who sought to supplement their income, such that a social history of the sea forces us also to discuss the social history of the land. MARTIN DUSINBERRE narrowed the focus from steamships in general to one particular steamship used by the Japanese NYK company in the 1880s and 1890s. Dusinberre used the story of the ***Yamashiro-maru*** in order to probe constructions of national identity in two 'sub-colonial' polities during the late-nineteenth century (Japan and Australia), and thus to think more broadly about the meaning of what C.A. Bayly has called 'the great acceleration' in world history. RUTH MANDUJANO (British Columbia) also focused on a single historical episode in order probe the wider interplay between steamships, diplomatic history and transnational migration in the early-twentieth century. One significance of her paper was to orient the discussion of 'transpacific' away from North America and instead to reintegrate the history of Mexico into the Pacific maritime world. In this way, the panel offered a truly global view of the 'Asia-Pacific'—a view that encompassed southern China, Portugal, Australia, Hawai'i, Japan, Mexico and Great Britain. LUKE FRANKS (Naperville) provided commentary on the panel. Franks argued, that one of the major shifts that occurred during the second half of the twentieth century was that steamships became a normal part of maritime interaction, thus losing the novelty value that they had had for an earlier generation such as the Japanese who went to Shanghai in 1862 or who crossed to the USA in 1864. But the three papers also showed, he argued, the perils of attempting to associate steamships with particular national identities, especially given the fundamentally transnational character of the ships themselves, their passengers, crew, and even their pirate assailants.

The final panel built on Mandujano's transpacific approach in order to study the movement not only of people but also of ideas, commodities, and scientific knowledge. KATRINA GULLIVER (Newburgh) examined the idea of the Pacific in literary texts in the early and mid-nineteenth century, thus highlighting the fact that the shortening of physical sea-space in the imagination was a phenomenon that actually predated the emergence of steam technology. RUDOLPH NG (Heidelberg) offered a nuanced, entangled account of the mid-nineteenth-century coolie trade, in which he showed that Chinese agents were as complicit in the recruitment of forced labour as their European counterparts: there were multiple actors and institutions at play, and to trace their different roles helps scholars move away from simplistic tropes of East-victim and West-perpetrator. ROBERT HELLYER (Winston-Salem) used the example of the Japanese green tea export industry in order to show not only the emergence of new networks between ports and the hinterland in Japan but also the significance of consumer tastes in the USA and their impact on the structure of

the industry. LARS SCHLADITZ (Erfurt) analysed the new frontiers of American scientific knowledge that accompanied the expansion of the US empire into the Pacific in the late 1890s by focusing on an American expedition to study Japanese whaling in the Japanese colony of Korea—an original approach that entangled not only the histories of colonists and the colonised in the Asia-Pacific arena, but also the interconnections between the worlds of humans and animals. Commentator David Mervart (Heidelberg) then challenged the panellists—and, indeed, all the participants—to consider whether they were attempting a 'soft' approach to maritime history (the recovery of historical episodes that have fallen through the net of national historiography) or 'hard' maritime history (the suggestion not only that national historiographies are missing some things, but that they are asking the wrong questions in the first place).

Such questions were at the heart of the plenary session, in which JAN RÜGER (London) suggested a number of difficulties and opportunities raised by the conference as seen from a non-Asian, non-Pacific historical perspective. We have a choice bringing the focus back to the opening comments by Martin Dusinberre: do we seek the specifics of a maritime, Braudelian space in our scholarly endeavours, or do we get rid of all maritime spaces and simply do global history? There is no good answer to that question, nor, arguably, should there be; but the papers presented at the conference brought that particular problem into relief and also perhaps suggested the range of methodologies that we need to apply in our attempts to advance our understanding of the Asia-Pacific maritime world in the long nineteenth century.

**Conference Overview:**

*Session One: The State and the Sea*

Commentator: Joachim Kurtz (Heidelberg)

Ronald Chung-yam Po (Heidelberg University, Germany): The Architecture of Sea Space: Modelling the Maritime World in the High Qing and Beyond

Chi Kong Lai (University of Queensland, Australia): The State and the Rise of China's new Maritime Networks, 1872-1911

Rotem Kowner (University of Haifa, Israel): Naval Power and the Struggle for the Western Pacific since the Mid-Nineteenth Century

*Session Two: Sea Voyages and New Identities*

Commentator: Martin Hofmann (Heidelberg)

Joshua Fogel (York University, Canada): The Japanese Venture Back to China: The Senzaimaru and its 1862 Mission to Shanghai

Gavin James Campbell (Doshisha University, Japan): "We must learn foreign knowledge": The Trans-Pacific Adventure of a Samurai Sailor, 1864-1865

Cindy McCreery (University of Sydney, Australia): Promoting Maritime Empires: loyal addresses from East Asian and Pacific Port communities to Prince Alfred, 1867-1871

*Session Three: Port Cities as Transcultural Spaces*

Commentator: Madeleine Herren-Oesch (Heidelberg)

Lisa Hellman (Stockholm University, Sweden): A place for Sweden? A spatial analysis of Canton from a non-Anglo-Saxon perspective

Mio Wakita (Heidelberg): Photographic Reflections: Port City Yokohama and the Tourist Photography Industry

Harald Fuess (Heidelberg): Containing Imperialism through Cosmopolitan Yokohama

Wayne Patterson (St. Norbert College, USA): Pusan at the Crossroads in the 1880s: Trade, Steamers, Maritime Customs, and Empire

*Session Four: Steamships and Asymmetrical Imperialisms*

Commentator: Luke Franks (North Central College, USA / Heidelberg)

Robert Antony (University of Macao, China): Pirates, Dragon Ladies, and Steamships: An Unconventional View of the China Seas in Modern Times

Martin Dusinberre (Newcastle University, UK / Heidelberg): Traversing Pacific Imperialisms: Hawai'i, Australia, and a 'pioneer' Japanese steamship

Ruth Mandujano López (University of British Columbia, Canada): Transpacific Steam: Disputes over Chinese Labour in the Mexican Port of Salina Cruz (1907-1914)

*Session Five: Pacific Crossings*

Commentator: David Mervart (Heidelberg)

Katrina Gulliver (Newburgh Historical Society, USA): The Pacific World, c. 1820-1870

Rudolph Ng (Heidelberg): The Spanish Coolie Network in Asia in the 19th century

Robert Hellyer (Wake Forest University, USA): Japanese Tea for American Oil: The 1870s as a Pacific Commercial Watershed

Lars Schladitz (Erfurt University, Germany): Whaling, Science, and Transmaritime Networks, 1910-1914

*Plenary Session*

Discussant: Jan Rüger (Birkbeck College, University of London, UK)



**Citation:** Martin Dusinberre. Review of *The Asia-Pacific Maritime World: Connected Histories in the Age of Empire.* H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. October, 2012.

**URL:** https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37383