Reviewer: Nikolay Murashkin

Postal address: 64/8 Goodwin Street, Kangaroo Point, 4169 QLD Australia

Institutional affiliation and job title:

Griffith University, Griffith Asia Institute, Visiting Fellow

E-mail address: nikolay.murashkin@gmail.com

Book review of: Esenbel, Selçuk (ed.), *Japan on the Silk Road: Perspectives and Encounters of Politics and Culture in Eurasia*. Leiden: Brill, 2017. xvi, 374 pp., €104.00 p/b.

The discussion of China's Belt and Road Initiative rendered the current academic and media discourse on the Silk Road region increasingly Sino-centric, often to the detriment of our understanding of other major East Asian countries' involvement in the region, especially in the modern era. In this context, the 2017 16-chapter volume edited by Selçuk Esenbel fills several gaps. It provides a rich and multi-disciplinary account on Japan's interaction with Central Eurasian countries and regions in the pivotal period of contemporary history: the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, covering the imperial periods of Meiji and Taishō eras, as well as the pre-war and wartime parts of the Shōwa era. This chronology resonates with the title in a curious way: the Silk Road itself is a medieval phenomenon, while the period reviewed by the book lies within 100-150 years of distance from the reader. Yet, this resonance should not come across as anachronism, since the volume engages with the ideational, geo-cultural and spatial dimensions of the Silk Road as imaginary and social construct that already existed in a certain form in the subject period.

The term *New Silk Road* has gained traction since the independence on post-Soviet Central Asia and rose to prominence as a social construct in heritage marketing, political rhetoric and economic jargon inside and outside the region. The buzz around China's Silk Road contemporary megaprojects made the discussion of the topic skewed and virtually amnesiac due to heavy reliance on projections and forward-looking statements. The volume edited by Esenbel provides a valuable intellectual retrospect by examining ideational and political processes that occurred in Japan during its imperial expansion from its Meiji-era reforms until the defeat in the World War II that can be viewed as precursors of present-day New Silk Road visions.

The book challenges and reframes the conceptualisation of Asian and Eurasian

sub-regions, allowing us to reimagine contemporary and historical regionalisation between East and Central Asia. Spanning the swathe across parts of the Ottoman, Qing and Russian empires, including Xinjiang and Mongolia, the authors show how Japan, a country perceived as insular and—especially in the present—maritime, pursued a multi-faceted engagement with continental Eurasia. While the interaction between Muslim and Buddhist intellectual traditions in Turkic Eurasia is not the main subject, it nonetheless provides a powerful undertone, especially as cultural, ideological and religious identities become instrumentalised in the great power rivalry – above all between Japan, on the one hand, and, on the other hand Russia and the USSR. Another recurrent motif is the projected commonality of Russia—whether Imperial or Soviet—as shared Other for Japan and Turkic peoples of Central Asia. This geographic and civilisational refraction is accompanied by an important human dimension due to the emphasis on social history and the agency of individuals, each of whom was influential in their own right—intellectuals, officers, writers, travellers—rather than on high politics.

Japan on the Silk Road can be viewed as trail-blazing in the English-language literature as it brings together historiographic accounts from Western, Eurasian and Japanese authors as well as different intellectual disciplines, ranging from political history to translation studies. Unfortunately, the space constraints of this review and the book's disciplinary diversity do not allow addressing each of the sixteen papers individually, whereas singling out any particular ones would not do justice to others due to their equal values in terms of intellectual contribution. All chapters introduce under-researched archival materials, other primary and secondary sources in Japanese, German, Turkish and other languages, with a particular spotlight on the literary aspect of cultural exchange: literature (including travel writing), linguistics and philology. At the same time, the work succeeds in being integrative without becoming excessively eclectic and constitutes a culturally and linguistically nuanced inquiry. Moreover, given the sheer scope of examined rare sources, the book's undoubted merit is in unearthing these abundant epistemic treasures accumulated (especially in Japan) and providing a detailed synthesis on their basis.

While the volume, in particular its first half, provides a useful contribution by addressing the phenomena of the Great Game and the Silk Road, as well as relevant discourses, by drawing useful historical parallels with current affairs, it also tends to emphasise the conflictual aspect of these encounters, inadvertently playing up to the

risk-averse tone, which often accompanies contemporary commentary on Central Asian affairs. The book might have perhaps benefited even more from a more critical engagement with the discourses of the Great Game and their implications for the supposed New Great Game, precisely by virtue of having the benefit of hindsight and the ability to locate and deconstruct the current discourse in the rich factual context, provided by this edited volume.

At the same time, the aforementioned observation is hardly a reproach, as the historical period covered in the book was replete with rising tensions and conflict between expansive empires, where many individuals duly receiving particular attention in the book, such as the military, the radical right and pan-Asianist ideologists, were among key agents. Furthermore, as the narrative focus of the book shifts from political affairs to literary and linguistic subjects in the latter chapters, their contextualisation in imperial interplay is not accompanied by the aforementioned discourse of Great Game power politics.

The Japan-Central Asia relationship is still rather sporadically covered by mainstream English-language academic literature, remaining a 'niche' field confined to a limited number of scholars. While the number of articles on current affairs has been increasing, books are rarer, especially when it comes to earlier periods of the subject's modern history. *Japan on the Silk Road* bridges an important gap and provides an intellectual stimulation to hopefully draw more scholarly attention to this topical subject.