

<BOOK REVIEWS>Defining Engagement : Japan and Global Contexts, 1940-1868, by Robert I. Hellyer

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*Defining Engagement:
Japan and Global Contexts,
1640–1868*

Robert I. Hellyer

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In *Defining Engagement*, Hellyer examines three key actors of Tokugawa Japan's foreign relations: the *bakufu*, Satsuma, and Tsushima. This approach stems from his observation that the central government, the *bakufu*, did not hold complete authority over foreign relations and that the maritime borders in which Satsuma and Tsushima were situated were not rigidly fixed. Indeed, Tokugawa Japan's foreign trade thrived through the flow of silver, copper, raw silk, ginseng, marine products, medicinal roots, sugar, and other valuable commodities; this was a space in which multiple actors, agendas, and diverging interests and rivalries were in constant competition.

In understanding this intriguing web of interactions between the central and local agencies that shaped the changing contours of Tokugawa Japan's foreign relations, Hellyer shows that "Japan's foreign relations were not defined by an overriding ideology of seclusion.... Tokugawa leaders consistently made pragmatic decisions, especially concerning foreign trade, in accordance with global commercial contexts" (p. 4). Hellyer does an excellent job in ascertaining how pragmatic interests permeated into Tokugawa Japan's foreign relations.

The strengths of *Defining Engagement* are threefold. First, Hellyer defies the tendency of current scholarship, which is compartmentalized into three groups of researchers working on Nagasaki, Satsuma, and Tsushima, respectively. For example, scholars who focus on Tsushima-Korea relations rarely attempt to explore the issues of Satsuma-Ryukyu trade. This kind of hairsplitting yet segregated specialization in the field often prevents readers from surveying the whole forest, revealing only some tall trees. Hellyer skilfully integrates the local perspectives of Satsuma and Tsushima into the overarching structure of foreign trade loosely guided by the *bakufu*. This approach allows readers to see clearly that "Satsuma and Tsushima leaders staked out places and roles for their domains in the overall system of foreign relations" (p. 50).

Second, Hellyer overcomes another tendency in current scholarship that rarely synthesizes Japan's relations with Asia and the Dutch to the eighteenth century and those with Russia and the West from the late eighteenth century. The chronological divide between them still behaves like oil and water. Unlike many scholars in the field, Hellyer explores how Satsuma and Tsushima conducted trade, negotiated with the *bakufu*, and

promoted their local agendas in their own way through the 1860s. Situating Satsuma and Tsushima in the context of the overall *bakufu* policy, Hellyer clarifies “a ground-level view on how and why the system of Japanese foreign relations was on the verge of change in the 1860s” (p. 233).

Third, Hellyer brings the local as well as central agendas of foreign relations into an integral framework of understanding by focusing on Japan’s connections with the China market. Examining from this angle, Hellyer finds that “while Western power was gradually emerging, Japan’s foreign trade and its overall system of foreign relations continued to be dominated by its connections with China” (p. 148). The China market, in Hellyer’s view, remained the most important factor of early modern Japan’s foreign relations, and occupied the minds of the policy makers of Satsuma, Tsushima, and the *bakufu*. Hellyer concludes: “The trade battle between the *bakufu* and Satsuma also occurred within the larger context of intercourse with the China market” (p. 148) to the end of Tokugawa Japan.

Despite these strengths, *Defining Engagement* is essentially based on secondary literature, not on original analysis of primary materials. It is noteworthy that Hellyer thoroughly scans through a wide range of works by Japanese scholars, gleans relevant data from them, and skilfully constructs a synthetic framework of understanding. But it should also be noted that his work, which is grounded in patchy and selective arguments, could be debunked when original research based on a range of rich extant primary materials brings up new findings and theories.

Another issue that makes *Defining Engagement* vulnerable is the author’s Japan-centered outlook. Needless to say, foreign relations involve more than one country. This book lacks the voices or agencies of Japan’s counterparts whose actions and reactions affected Japan’s foreign relations. In the early eighteenth century, notes Hellyer, Amenomori defined “a language of domain agency that Tsushima officials would utilize over the next 150 years” (p. 65). In this language, Tsushima posited itself as the collector of intelligence on Korea and the continent, as well as a defensive bulwark of Japan. Does this mean that Korea posed a threat to Japan? Why did Korea then annually offer hundreds of bags of rice and beans to Tsushima? Hellyer continues: “In 1748, the Nagasaki magistrate characterized Satsuma’s defensive role as ‘containing’ Ryukyu” (p. 68). Again, this defensive role, which Tsushima and Satsuma played, remains enigmatic as long as the counterparts of their national defense are kept in darkness.

Similarly, Hellyer rarely traces how the China market, the focal point of Japan’s foreign trade, behaved over time. Throughout the book, the China market is presented as something rather passive, invisible, and static. Hellyer says: “Overall this study demonstrates that because the system of foreign relations was divided among several actors—the *bakufu*, Tsushima, and Satsuma—it included multiple voices and agendas which went beyond a single and commonly held ideology of seclusion” (p. 12). But these multiple voices and agendas are all squeezed into a Japan-centered perspective. Bilateral perspectives, which are supposed to constitute foreign relations, are in short supply.

Reviewed by Nam-lin Hur