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Strange Parallels: Japan

ROBERT HELLYER

In chapter 1 of volume 2 of *Strange Parallels*, Victor Lieberman urges the reader to understand that: "The excitement of Eurasian comparisons derives not from a spurious superficial identity, but from the juxtaposition of overarching similarities with idiosyncratic local outcomes" (Lieberman 2009, 119). In "Creating Japan," Chapter 4 of the same volume, Lieberman convincingly shows that Eurasian comparisons offer a valuable, and truly exciting, lens to explore Japan from circa 800 to 1830. He identifies numerous and provocative parallels with other states that present not only fresh ways to consider Japan within world history, but also to locate and assess idiosyncratic elements of the Japanese experience.

Lieberman classifies Japan as part of what he terms Eurasia's "protected zone" (or "protected rimlands"), which also includes mainland Southeast Asia and most of Europe, a category that he notes only becomes coherent when contrasted with the "exposed zone" of China, South Asia, and Southwest Asia, an area "defined primarily by subjection to Inner Asian conquest elites" (xxi–xxii). He outlines first, the process by which Japan's "charter civilization," a socio-political order based on Chinese penal and administrative models—the *ritsuryō* codes—emerged in the eighth century. In roughly the first half of the chapter, Lieberman explores the evolution of the charter, *ritsuryō* polity during the Heian Period (794–1185) before turning to a discussion of especially the political fragmentation that marked the late Kamakura (1185–1333) and Ashikaga (1336–1571) periods. In the chapter's second half, he examines the subsequent cultural homogeneity and political integration that transpired during the Tokugawa [Edo] period (1603–1868). For Lieberman many of Japan's idiosyncratic characteristics developed because unlike other areas of the Eurasian "protected zone," Japan's geography allowed it to be "exceptionally well protected against unwanted cultural, commercial, and most particularly, military incursions" (376).

In a chapter of just over 120 pages, Lieberman presents an immense range of political, social, cultural, demographic, religious, and economic Eurasian parallels as well as idiosyncratic elements of the Japanese experience. To illustrate Lieberman's interpretation, I will highlight aspects of two of his main themes: state

Robert Hellyer (hellyer@wfu.edu) is Associate Professor in the Department of History at Wake Forest University.

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development and the role of outside contact.[1] Concerning the development of the early Japanese state, Lieberman notes that the internal complexity and local penetration of the *ritsuryō* polity in 750 was "as least as developed as Angkor, Pagan, and Dai Viet in the 13th century, and far more sophisticated than 13th-century Kiev" (384). He stresses that the relative advancement of Japan was due to "idiosyncrasies in the donor and recipient cultures and in the transmission process itself;" an intriguing way to consider the simultaneous inside and outside forces that made Chinese (and to a lesser degree Korean) influence so important in the development of Japan's charter regime (384). For one, Chinese and Korean political systems, he explains, were more "practical and portable," especially in comparison to Indic statecraft, which among other factors helps to explain its more fleeting influence on Southeast Asia.

Lieberman argues that in subsequent centuries the Heian-centered court proved especially adept in preserving clear lines of authority and tempering intra-elites disputes. "The peculiar Japanese separation between sacred imperial authority and hard political power" meant that for one, abdication by emperors in favor of specific heir proved far less disruptive than practices in Indic Southeast Asia or Kiev (393). Moreover the Heian polity's limited commercial contacts with the continent mitigated the "twin dangers of overseas military entanglement and foreign invasion," which plagued Pagan, Angkor, Kiev, the Carolingians, and Valois France (398). He casts the period from circa 1280 to 1600 as a time, first of devolution then subsequent reintegration, noting how "charter legacies inspired post-14th-century reunification more directly than in Indic Southeast Asia, where the heritage of Pagan and Angkor lacked dynastic focus, or in Russia, where Tatar political influences modified those of Kiev" (414).

In "Tokugawa Idiosyncrasies," the chapter's final section, Lieberman stresses that the Tokugawa period presents most prominently a variation on the "common theme of sustained, unprecedented post-1600 integration" that he also identifies in Russia, France, Burma, Siam, and Vietnam (439). As before, he similarly highlights unique aspects of Japan's political development, noting that "unlike European and Southeast Asian rulers, the *shogun* claimed no paramount loyalty from his subjects and made no effort-through ritual, myth or political institutions-to cultivate popular attachment to his person." Moreover, distinct from "the more unitary systems of post-1600 Russia, France, and Vietnam," the Tokugawa polity had no "imperial code of administrative law, no imperial bureaucracy, no monopoly of standing soldiery, no general levy for revenue or conscripts" (438–439). Lieberman also notes the absence of a "foreign component" in the shaping of the post-1600 polity, showing yet another valuable contrast to Russia, France, Burma and Siam, where foreign invasions helped new regimes gain power (439). He adds to this point in the concluding pages of the chapter,

[1]I note that Peter Perdue employed a similar analytic strategy in his review of volume 1 of *Strange Parallels* (Perdue 2008, 272).

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stressing that without large-scale foreign conflicts, Tokugawa leaders did not face "insistent, bitter demands from below to ethnicize politics such as transformed our other five rimlands [Burma, Siam, Vietnam, Russia, and France]" (490).

Lieberman presents a balanced and cogent overview of a thousand years of Japanese history that rivals surveys written by Japan specialists. Those teaching world history and considering including sections on Japan will benefit from the rich comparative points offered throughout the chapter. Moreover this historian of Japan will certainly consult Lieberman's perspectives on other parts of Eurasia in volume 2 (as well as volume 1) when developing sections of future world history courses.

A historian of Japan may find details on which to quibble in Lieberman's overview. But taking such an approach, he or she will miss the instructive and compelling comparisons offered by Lieberman's impressive scholarship. To add one more example, this time about economic perspectives, Lieberman provides valuable global context to consider early modern Japanese economic growth; into the eighteenth century Japan continued its economic momentum that began in the fourteenth century while economies in much of Europe and Southeast Asia stalled in period from c. 1630 to 1710 (448–449). By contrast after 1720, the Tokugawa regime faced economic challenges and a weakening political position. Consequently by 1820, among Lieberman's comparative group of states, Japan alone lacked a substantially stronger political regime, a point that adds useful global context concerning the fall of Tokugawa shogunate (*bakufu*) in the Meiji Restoration of 1868 (457). My only disappointment, and it is a small one, is that Lieberman does not offer more comparisons of what is in many respects a more appropriate geographic match for the Japanese archipelago: other archipelagos in insular Southeast Asia in the period from c. 800 to 1830.

Nonetheless on the whole, Lieberman's inclusion of Japan in the Eurasian "protected zone" resonates. Historians of Japan, of course, will be aware of a key Japanese idiosyncrasy that emerges from his comparative analysis: that Japan faced no foreign invasion after the thirteenth century. Yet historians of Japan may want to consider that factor in a new light, given that Lieberman demonstrates the vital role that foreign military incursions played in state formation in other Eurasian states during the early modern period. Furthermore, Lieberman affirms the need to be cautious about locating "national" political and cultural elements in Japan (and in other states) before the nineteenth century.

In many respects, Lieberman's idiosyncratic points about Japan stand out over the parallels he identifies with other parts of Eurasia. Thus perhaps the most important take-away from Lieberman's analysis (and another point he notes early in his Japan chapter) is the necessity of being ever cognizant of the line between conclusions that essentialize—locate special Japanese essences or characteristics that produce historical events—and those that highlight the idiosyncratic—particular and often unique aspects that develop from a convergence of historical factors. To be sure it is at times a vague boundary with which a

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historian of any nation or region must grapple. Yet since at least the late nineteenth century, many Western scholars of Japan have felt compelled to answer a question seemingly ever present in popular discourse: how to "interpret" a perceived "mysterious" Japan.[2] Lieberman's informed and measured comparative approach—consciously departing from binary comparisons to Western Europe that previously guided much research on Japan—offers a model for locating particular aspects of Japan's past without the broad generalizations, such as ideals of a purported Japanese cultural "way," that verge on essentialism.

Obviously, few scholars will be able to match the incredible breadth of Lieberman's comparative analysis. Yet with both his chapter on Japan and the entire two-volume work, Lieberman suggests a path for historians of Japan to explore the Japanese experience in fresh, comparative ways. In his introduction to volume 2, Lieberman outlines how his study seeks, by identifying common patterns and parallels in states across Eurasia over a thousand years, to make a "fourth axis of Eurasian comparison" that goes beyond the questions that have guided much research on global history in recent years, such as explaining the uneven development of industrialization and the divergence of economic and political power in the world in recent centuries (9).

For their part, many historians of Japan have researched swathes of the Japanese past to explain particular national questions; for example, the industrial success of Japan vis-à-vis other Asian states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (which Lieberman notes) (371), the rise of militarism in the 1920s and 1930s, and the economic "miracle" that produced high-speed economic growth after WWII. Without question, historians of Japan still must be willing to embrace the task of analyzing the past to inform pressing, contemporary issues—the story of past natural disasters and responses to them comes to mind in light of the tragic events of 2011 in Japan. Yet Lieberman shows the value, and the exciting possibilities, available by decoupling from such questions, and looking, through a methodical, chronological, and global comparative approach, for ways to engage with, and consider Japan's history.

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[2]Such as Hearn (1904).

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