

Prue S. Holstein, *The German Experience of Japan's Treaty Port System. A Case Study of C. Nickel & Co. Ltd., 1860-1923* (Routledge, 2025).

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In the history of imperialism, Germany is often regarded as a minor actor, given the comparatively small extent of territories under direct colonial control and the loss of all colonies as a result of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. In her study of the trading company C. Nickel & Co., Prue Holstein situates Germany's "participatory imperialism" within the broader framework of "informal empire", a mode of imperial practices particularly significant for our understanding of the history of imperialism in East Asia. Western merchants were permitted to establish themselves in so-called treaty ports on the basis of agreements—commonly referred to as unequal treaties—concluded between Euro-American powers and states such as China and Japan between the 1840s and the 1860s. Although these treaties were the result of war (for example, the First Opium War, 1839–1842) or of gunboat diplomacy (the "opening" of Japan by American and European naval forces in the 1850s) and are generally considered disadvantageous to China and Japan, they nonetheless enabled the Qing dynasty and the Tokugawa shogunate to impose restrictions on residency of foreigner merchants, on market access, and on land ownership for foreign merchants. (Japanese subjects, by contrast, were in principle free to trade and settle anywhere in Europe or the United States.) Against the widespread assumption that treaty ports were spaces in which Japanese authority was severely constrained, Holstein's study offers a more nuanced picture and demonstrates that Japanese officials could, and did, exercise considerable agency. Complaints among foreign residents about Japanese "obstructionism" and "unfair treatment," as dealt with in many chapters of this study, are a clear indication of the effectiveness of Japanese efforts to limit the freedom of action enjoyed by foreign merchants.

To be sure, the unequal treaties granted foreign powers privileges that European and American merchants and trading companies readily exploited. One such privilege was extraterritoriality, which meant that foreign nationals and companies could not be sued in local courts but instead fell under the jurisdiction of consular courts presided over by a consul—usually a lawyer—of the relevant European power (or the United States). While imperial powers and their merchants exploited this system extensively in China—as Driscoll shows in his provocative study *The Whites Are Enemies of Heaven*—in Japan extraterritoriality and consular jurisdiction generated comparatively

little conflict. Harald Fuess demonstrates this in his chapter in the *Routledge Handbook of Modern Japanese History*, and Holstein reaches similar conclusions in her analysis of the court cases involving Nickel & Co. (ch. 2). Holstein's study shows that courts frequently ruled in favor of the Japanese side when clear violations had occurred. One possible explanation lies in class distinctions: many diplomats had an aristocratic background and socialized more readily with their Japanese counterparts than with merchants—let alone with “the common folk”—of their own nationality. Sailors and laborers, in particular, were often dismissed as “the scum of the earth” (p. 69) and thus were unlikely to find sympathy from an aristocratic judge intent on preserving cordial bilateral relations with Japan (p. 81).

Nickel & Co. was not a typical trading company like the better-known C. Illies & Co., H. Ahrens & Co., or Jardine Matheson & Co.—the notorious British firm whose narcotics trade helped trigger the Opium War—about which detailed studies exist. Nickel did not engage in long-distance trade or operate its own shipping; instead, it handled import-export business on the spot in Japan's ports, “on a day-to-day basis” (p. 33). This meant that they served as local “landing agents” (p. 148) for trading firms such as Illies and Ahrens and for shipping companies like Norddeutscher Lloyd, conducting most of their business in the port of Kobe—to the history of which this study makes a significant contribution.

Nickel & Co. handled cargo in the days before ports had large piers where ocean-going steamers could dock and unload directly. Until the 1920s, ships had to anchor offshore without direct access to wharves (*hatoba*, p. 148). Companies such as Nickel recruited local labor to tow vessels closer to the *hatoba*, handled stevedoring via lighters (small boats), managed customs clearing, and stored goods until they were collected by local merchants. They also supplied incoming ships with coal and provisions, which they procured locally. Although the company had its origins in Nagasaki and Yokohama, it built its “waterfront empire” primarily in Kobe (ch. 3). In carrying out these tasks, Nickel competed with other foreign firms and Japanese entrepreneurs for wharf space (ch. 5), on-shore storage facilities (ch. 7), and (cheap) local labor (ch. 6), as well as for access to local merchants who moved imported goods into the domestic market and supplied export commodities such as tea and silk.

After the revision of the unequal treaties and the abolition of extraterritoriality in 1899, European companies became subject to Japanese law and had to settle legal disputes in

Japanese courts. Although many Europeans feared a major backlash, business at Nickel continued as usual—again confirming that extraterritoriality and consular jurisdiction had not made a decisive difference. As Holstein shows, Nickel and other firms did complain about the “obstructionism” of Japanese authorities, who now sought to push Western local companies out of business and allegedly favored the Japanese side. Significant instances of unfair jurisdiction, however, were not observed, and both the export-import sector in general and companies such as Nickel & Co. continued to grow steadily. This growth occurred despite the persistence of certain one-sided restrictions, such as the ban on foreign land ownership, which was abolished only with the 1926 revision of the Alien Land Law (ch. 7). Restrictions on land ownership affected not only companies such as Nickel but also foreign clubs and societies, including the German East Asiatic Society (OAG), which had to rent premises for its activities (see Spang, Wippich, and Saaler, *Die OAG*). Companies and societies such as the OAG relied on Japanese middlemen to rent land and buildings or secured them through the Japanese government. Unlike commercial firms, the OAG was able to purchase its own clubhouse in 1913 after registering in 1904 as a Japanese legal entity (*shadan hōjin*), which exempted it from the Alien Land Law.

More than the abolition of extraterritoriality in 1899 or the “strengthening hold of the Japanese government on its national economy and international trade” (p. 135), the escalating German-British rivalry in world trade during the first decade of the twentieth century posed a serious challenge to Nickel & Co.’s business activities, as Holstein convincingly shows in chapters 5 to 8. Because many of its customers were British firms, the company’s founder, Carl Nickel, registered “C. Nickel & Co. Limited” on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange in 1902 as a British public company (p. 130). As a consequence, British nationals had to be appointed to the board (p. 137), but this step protected the company from harassment by British authorities. Under the founder’s successor, Christian Holstein—who was also the author’s father-in-law—Nickel & Co. continued to thrive.

The outbreak of World War I in 1914 led to a further “Anglicization” of the company. German managers and staff were dismissed (pp. 233f), but the company survived the war and was not subjected to the confiscations that affected German firms and societies such as the OAG (see Spang, Wippich, and Saaler, *Die OAG*). The dismissal of German employees also affected Christian Holstein, who had served as managing director of Nickel & Co. since 1906. More significantly, however, he became involved in an

incident in which a Japanese swineherd was allegedly kidnapped—the subject of chapter 10. Holstein organized the shipment of provisions to the German leased territory of Kiautschou in the Chinese province of Shandong, where the East Asian Squadron of the German Imperial Navy was anchored, and hired the swineherd to care for 37 pigs that formed part of the cargo. Although he had been promised a return within a few days, the steamer carrying the pigs headed toward the South Seas, eventually arriving at Jaluit Atoll in the Marshall Islands, where the German Squadron was then bound. The swineherd, a Tsukamura Kanekichi, became stranded on Jaluit and was even imprisoned, returning to Kobe not after a few days but only after three months, in October 1914. Upon his return, he sued Nickel & Co. for kidnapping—a case widely discussed in the treaty-port media, especially in the English-language *Japan Chronicle* but also in the local *Kōbe Shinbun*. Comparing the local press with the English-language media, Prue Holstein concludes that considerable anti-foreign sentiment still characterized Japanese coverage, whereas the *Japan Chronicle*, despite its pro-British orientation, sided with Holstein—a German national—in condemning his arrest and the trial as “unfair.” Although Tsukamura’s claim that he had been “abducted” was not entirely unfounded, higher Japanese courts eventually found Christian Holstein not guilty, since it was—in all likelihood—unknown to him that the steamer was bound for the Marshall Islands rather than Tsingtao in Kiautschou when it left port. *The Japan Chronicle* concluded that Holstein’s initial treatment resulted from “commercial jealousy,” an assessment shared by the American Embassy (p. 247), which, after the outbreak of the war, represented German interests in Japan as a neutral nation (until 1917). Despite these complications, Holstein stayed in Japan after the First World War and established a new import agency, which he ran until his death in 1954 (p. 261).

The study draws on a broad range of primary sources, including the *Japan Chronicle*, the quasi-official newspaper of Kobe’s foreign community. As in the kidnapping case, the *Japan Chronicle* cannot be regarded as an unbiased source, but the author contextualizes its narrative by consulting archival materials in Britain, Germany, Japan, and Australia. Given Nickel & Co.’s links to Hamburg, the archive of the Ostasiatischer Verein (East Asian Club, OAV) might have offered additional insights, since the city was the base of Nickel’s main customers. Although based in Tokyo and Yokohama, the weekly *Deutsche Japan-Post* also covered events in Kobe and might have added further nuance to the overall narrative.

In contrast to the study’s extensive use of primary sources, its engagement with existing

research on the history of treaty ports remains limited. This limited attention to previous scholarship is exemplified by the “journal articles” section of the bibliography, which contains only 18 entries, of which only one is written in German. Given that the book examines a German company and focuses on German “participatory imperialism,” greater engagement with existing scholarship would have enhanced its relevance for scholars, particularly historians of treaty-port societies. Even in the monograph section, several standard works—such as Auslin’s *Negotiating with Imperialism*, Driscoll’s above-mentioned study, Eberstein’s monograph on the OAV, Robert Hellyer’s study of green tea—Japan’s most important export good in the nineteenth century—and various contributions to *The Meiji Restoration* (ed. by Harald Fuess and Robert Hellyer)—would have merited inclusion and discussion in the text.

Apart from this and a small number of editorial oversights (Count Friedrich zu Eulenburg is frequently misspelled as Eulenberg), this case study of C. Nickel & Co. makes an important contribution to our understanding of how international trade in Japan’s treaty ports, and in the same ports after the end of extraterritoriality and their transformation into “normal” Japanese cities, functioned, and how such companies have to be placed into a transnational perspective, given their multinational ownership and management, as well as their close ties to the local community of the port of Kobe. The focus on interactions between foreign companies and their local employees—including unskilled laborers—deserves particular praise, as this has been rarely addressed in previous scholarship. Significantly, this study clearly demonstrates that there were limits to the exploitation of the unequal treaties by foreign merchants when it came to labor relations and various legal issues. Further studies drawing on contemporary Japanese sources could contribute to a more nuanced understanding of treaty port society in nineteenth-century Japan.

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