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Nineteenth-Century Japanese Whaling and Early Territorial Expansion in the Pacific

Nineteenth-century American whalers saw the wide-open hunting grounds of the Pacific as bounded by a puzzlingly fortress-like Japan. One of the major points made by Commodore Perry in 1854—as he pushed to open Japan’s ports to trade—was that American whalers needed to be able to resupply without being attacked by Japanese people upholding restrictions on the entry of foreigners into their country. In contrast, from the Japanese perspective, whaling was an enterprise bounded by the distance one could reasonably tow a whale carcass back to shore using small open rowboats. The Japanese were initially quite surprised by the increasing numbers of foreign ships coming within sight of their shores, beginning in the late eighteenth century and steadily growing throughout the nineteenth. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, Japan was rapidly changing under the new Meiji regime (1868–1912) and the emergence of a modern Japanese whaling industry went hand-in-hand with the development of a strong, internationally competitive Japan, with slogans such as *fukoku kyōhei* (rich country, strong army) reflecting an expansionist imperial policy that included the military conquest of new territories.

Whaling played an important role in Japanese expansion, whether for the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868) or for the Meiji government: it offered not just necessary resources, but also political possibilities for nonmilitary competition within the global imperial context. The transformation of coastal whaling groups from the early seventeenth century into a more modern pelagic whaling industry took place while Japan was wrestling with its place in global imperial politics. The turbulent nineteenth century culminated in a revolutionary shift toward the rapid Westernization of Japan. This in turn led to the growth of Japan as a competitive modern empire. The role of whaling in that transformation shows how Japan’s new attention to the open ocean would culminate in the industrialization and massive expansion of all Japanese fisheries into global waters in the early twentieth century; what William Tsutsui has called Japan’s pelagic empire.¹ The interaction between whalers, whaling grounds, and ocean-based imperial expansion

¹ William M. Tsutsui, “The Pelagic Empire: Reconsidering Japanese Expansion,” in *Japan at Nature’s Edge: The Environmental Context of a Global Power*, ed. Ian Jared Miller, Julia Adeney Thomas, and Brett L. Walker (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2013), 21–38.

sion in and around Japan in the mid-nineteenth through early twentieth centuries also highlights the complexity of the concept of territory when applied to maritime spaces. Just as new nation-states were solidifying their control over terrestrial boundaries, these same powers were pushing for greater common access to global waters. Japanese imperial development took advantage of the argument for open marine territory even as they pushed to make a space for terrestrial colonial claims in Asia.

The Evolution of Coastal Whaling Groups

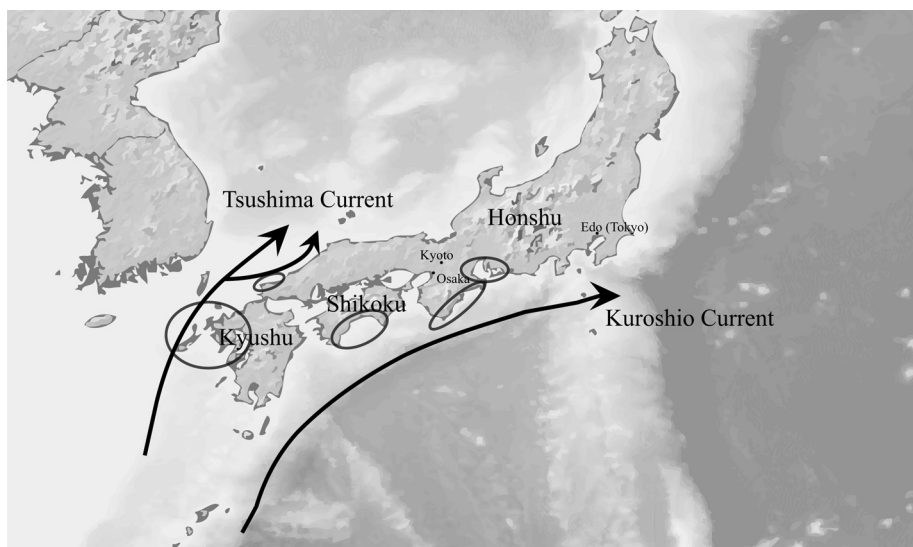


Figure 1:
Locations of
coastal whaling
groups along the
Kuroshio and
Tsushima cur-
rents, from the
mid-seventeenth
through nine-
teenth centuries.
Map by the
author.

The early modern whaling industry in Japan consisted of many whaling groups, where each was its own business and operated out of a specific village location with a good beach for whale processing. Whaling group locations all lay along coastal migration routes for right, humpback, and gray whales in the western half of Japan (Figure 1). These species followed the path of the Kuroshio and Tsushima currents on their way to and from winter feeding and summer breeding grounds. Because these currents come closest to the Japanese islands in the west, there were few whaling groups outside this part of the country. However, under the pressures of competition and changing whale availability, by the early nineteenth century some whaling groups were considering

moving to new grounds. They soon had to contend with the fact that American whaling from the 1830s to 1850s decimated the same whale populations (particularly right whales) they relied upon. With declining catches, most Japanese coastal whaling groups had collapsed by the end of the nineteenth century or shifted to new forms of whaling, adopting foreign techniques and technologies. By the early 1900s, a variety of whaling companies operated with modern harpoon-gun whaling techniques based on the Norwegian model. In 1909, these companies were amalgamated into a single government-supported monopolistic corporation, using the same iron-hulled whaling ships and a system very similar to the pelagic whaling of other modern industrial whaling nations, working out of a much smaller number of ports than before.²

These changes in Japanese whaling were not due to merely economic or resource- and technology-driven decisions. They were also influenced by ongoing political changes. Until the major political reorganization of 1868, coastal whaling was closely entwined with the locally distributed power of the domains, each led by a lord focused on the prosperity of his own territory. Whaling groups were expensive, so their management often had ties to government. Groups sometimes fell under domainal oversight and relied on loans, or sometimes supported regional or domainal income through the taxes and fees they paid. Governments were also invested in territorial control of the nearshore areas used by whaling groups. As the international political situation shifted over the course of the nineteenth century, whaling offered new political opportunities, but only if either the shogunate or, later, the Meiji government could shift away from the highly localized version of whaling pursued by Tokugawa-period groups.

By the 1820s, the work performed by whaling groups included guarding the precious marine resources they claimed for the benefit of the domain. During this period, domains were known as *kuni*: a word that now means country or nation, but its earlier meaning indicates the degree of independence lords had within the shogunal system. As potential rivals for power started to include not just neighboring domains but also ships from outside Japan, a focus on the success of individual domains became much more difficult to maintain, and not coincidentally, whaling groups also started running into more problems staying solvent. As the idea of the *kuni* shifted from individual domains to the nation-state of Japan in the Meiji period, the ways that whales as a natural

2 In fact, from 1901 to 1907, most Japanese whaling ships were purchased or leased directly from Norway. Hiroyuki Watanabe, *Japan's Whaling: The Politics of Culture in Historical Perspective*, trans. Hugh Clarke (Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2009), 13, 26.

resource could support that unit also shifted. The rapid expansion of American whaling into the Pacific and its involvement with Perry's push to open Japan to global trade were part of the pressure that drove Japan towards this political shift. Therefore, pelagic whaling following the American model offered the potential for a new industry along the lines of silk factories or steel mills, to be copied and adapted by Meiji-era imperial planners to help Japan compete on the global stage. Similarly, pelagic whaling with engine-driven and then, after the 1920s, factory ships based on the Norwegian model presented another opportunity to rework the Japanese whaling industry within a competitive global market in an era of nationalism and imperialism. Whaling's early ties to Japan's increasingly militaristic expansion of empire played a role in shaping the Japanese empire's footprint, particularly on the ocean. (Figure 2).

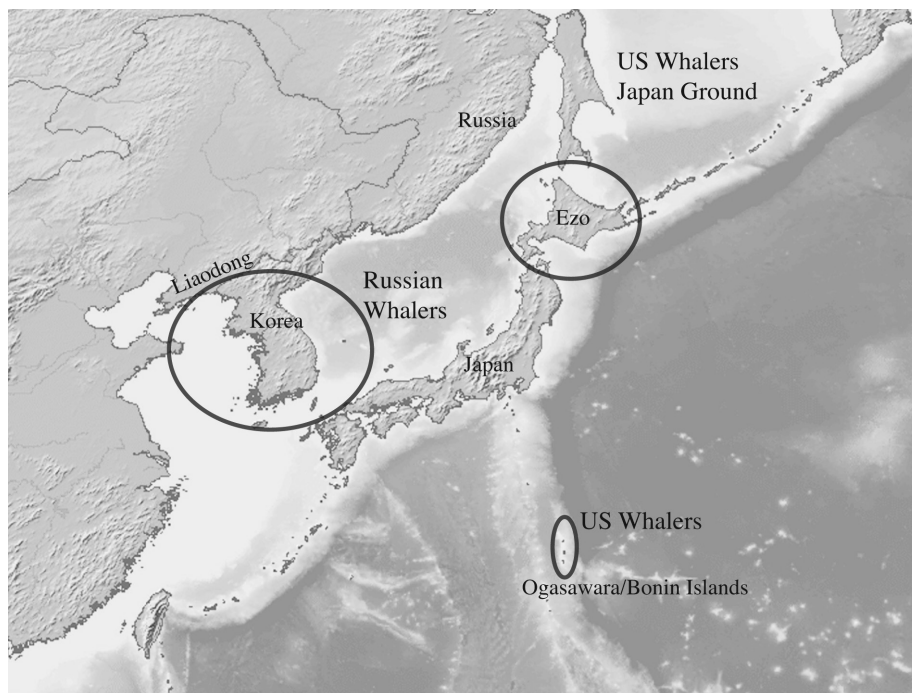


Figure 2:
The pressures of American and Russian whaling shaped the footprint of the Japanese empire. Circles indicate new Japanese whaling locations between 1850 and 1910. Map by the author.

Whaling and Territorial Expansion

The earliest attempts at expansion beyond established Tokugawa-period whaling areas into more colonial spaces came under pressure of Russian expansion around the turn of the nineteenth century. The shogunate was increasingly worried that Russia might gain a foothold in the far north, supplanting the Japanese interests that were expanding into the same area. Various attempts at setting up whaling groups in Ezo (later Hokkaido) failed from the early 1800s onwards. These failures did not seem to diminish the appeal of whaling as a way to stand firm against encroaching empires. The Meiji government continued to back whaling operations based out of Hokkaido, with their last attempt combining the ideas of northern defense—sending out a group of people who might reside in the area and therefore lay claim to the territory—with the notion of expanding existing whaling operations, which would expand the resource base for the Meiji state. However, because this coastal whaling was still reliant on migratory populations of whales that were dying out due to the intense whaling pressure throughout the Pacific in the nineteenth century, by the early 1900s the Hokkaido whalers were forced to cease operations. Government concern about competition with foreign powers, combined with whalers' needs, precipitated a push to find new, more plentiful whaling grounds beyond this first tentative expansion around Hokkaido, including a failed attempt at American-style whaling around the contested Ogasawara/Bonin Islands.

Some whaling expansions had even more direct ties to the broader trends of militaristic Japanese imperial expansion. The waters around Korea became a new whaling ground because they were full of the fin whales that were too fast to be caught by anything but the modern whaling technology developed in Norway at the end of the nineteenth century. Both Russian and Japanese whalers were highly invested in finding ways to make new claims while whales there were still plentiful. Especially after the 1880s, when the Russian whaling fleet began exporting many tons of fin-whale meat from the waters around Korea to Japan, Japanese whalers started planning ways they could enter the competition and, in an era of increasing nationalism, avoid paying another country's company. Imperial Japan first claimed whaling territory on the western side of the Korean peninsula after they gained a concession on the Liaodong peninsula in 1895 upon winning the Sino-Japanese war. Soon after gaining this territory, a Japanese whaling company launched operations in the waters around the Korean and the Liaodong peninsulas, and began shipping whale products back to Kyushu with the support of the

Japanese government. After the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, nearly the entire Russian whaling fleet in the area became spoils of war and was given by the Japanese government to a company based out of Nagasaki.

Meanwhile, other whaling supporters turned their attention to more open waters beyond the Sea of Japan. Fujikawa Sankei, a major fisheries promoter in the transition period between Tokugawa and Meiji Japan, wanted to open up the seas to Japanese use on the model of other nations already commanding marine resources, thus making Japan an empire with power over the seas. The idea of building a stronger nation appears repeatedly in his book on whaling, *Hogeï zushiki*. Fujikawa suggests there should be a focus on marine resources as national resources, no matter how far from the nation's terrestrial holdings they might be. The nearshore whaling of the Tokugawa period, along with other specialized fisheries, pushed the boundaries of Japan out only a few kilometers from shore. People like Fujikawa envisioned a much broader scope for the boundaries of Japanese power, pushing out beyond coastal waters into the deeper ocean, just as "western people, while whaling, stride 10,000 *ri* across the ocean," a stride which had already brought them into contact and competition with Japan.³ He showed a distinct awareness that the strength of modern Japan would come from being able to maximize their use of pelagic and not just coastal marine resources.

Sea Power, Empire, and Japanese Whaling

The steady push from nearby waters to ever more distant, new spaces for marine resource harvests was not unique to whaling, but rather was part and parcel of changing environmental and political relationships throughout Japan, both over the course of the Tokugawa and into the transition to the modern era. Fisheries were one of the major areas of growth for Japan around the turn of the twentieth century. They provided food for a growing population, and offered an opportunity to move some of that growing population out into future territories. They also provided a ready excuse for the presence of naval vessels echoing Perry's call for whalers' protection half a century before, as new markets in foreign ports echoed the earlier opening of treaty ports within Japan.

³ One *ri* was approximately 3.9 kilometers, but the number 10,000 was often used simply to denote incredibly large amounts, so a direct conversion would be misleadingly precise. Fujikawa Sankei, *Hogeï zushiki* (Kobe: Inoue Shinkōdō, 1888), 13a.

For many fisheries, moving further offshore from the Japanese home islands with new technologies such as trawlers also avoided competition with remaining coastal fishermen using older technologies to harvest increasingly stressed nearshore fish populations. While whaling had been at the forefront of nineteenth-century attempts to expand the reach of Japan both politically and economically, the mid-century collapse of whale stocks—under pressure from American whalers—had already put many whaling groups out of business by the time the Norwegian bow-mounted harpoon gun offered a solution in the form of fin and blue whales found in deeper ocean waters. Thus, competition with local coastal whalers was much less of an issue for early whaling corporations than it was in the transition period of other fisheries offshore, and they did not need to push all the way to Antarctica until Japan's pelagic empire was well underway in the 1930s.

While Japan's Antarctic whaling is the major focus today in global whale conversation, modern Japanese whalers did not leap to the far reaches of the Southern Ocean and leave Pacific whales entirely behind. In the context of the ebbs and flows of whaling grounds over the course of the nineteenth century and into Japan's imperial era, Antarctica was just one of the increasingly distant areas into which Japanese whalers ventured to hunt whales. By the start of the nineteenth century, imperial expansion of foreign powers pushed the government to consider supporting whalers' expansion to Japan's problematic northern borders, and then to the southeast. By the end of the century, they were operating to the west around the Korean peninsula, adding new processing stations in Korea and Hokkaido alongside their conquest and development as Japanese territories. Throughout this history, whalers frequently relied on government support to maintain capital-intensive groups or corporations. Whaling's political relevance varied throughout this expansion, but it was never wholly apolitical, and whaling was a continuous and important part of the gradual but not necessarily steady creation of Japan's pelagic empire.

Further Reading

Arch, Jakobina. *Bringing Whales Ashore: Oceans and the Environment of Early Modern Japan*. Weyerhaeuser Environmental Series. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018.

Watanabe, Hiroyuki. *Japan's Whaling: The Politics of Culture in Historical Perspective*. Translated by Hugh Clarke. Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press, 2009.