REVIEW ARTICLE

Southeast Asia in Modern Japanese Thought: The Development and Transformation of "Nanshin Ron". By Shimizu Hajime. Canberra: Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian History, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, June 1980. Pp. 56.

In the last few years, significant beginnings have been made to present to the English readers the Japanese side of the origins of the Pacific War in 1941. It is a self-evident truism that accounts based on Japanese sources must eventually contribute towards a more balanced history of this epoch-making war. Given the preoccupation with pin-pointing the origins of this war, it is almost inevitable that the focus of attention should be the inter-war years, especially the early Showa period (*c.* 1930–43), e.g., the impressive five-volume project of the Columbia University Press on Japan's road to Pearl Harbour and Singapore. For this reason, the mimeographed paper under review, Shimizu Hajime's *Southeast Asia in Modern Japanese Thought: The Development and Transformation of "Nanshin Ron"* is a welcome corrective. It shows that Japanese territorial ambitions in Southeast Asia had a longer period of gestation and evolution in the form of geopolitical-strategic thought than a focus on the 1930s would suggest. In the longer historical perspective, the 1930s only provided the opportunities for developing and transforming deep-rooted concepts of economics, geography, and politics into a coherent doctrine of aggressive action and expansion.

In Japanese historiography, "Nanshin Ron" is the collective label given to Japanese writings on the importance to Japan of the South Seas region or "Nanyo". To those unfamiliar with Japanese historical literature, the surprise sprung by Shimizu's paper is that as early as the late Tokugawa period, even before Japan itself was under Western pressure to end the self-imposed isolation to become part of the emerging global trading system, a few Japanese, like Sato Nobuhiro (1769–1850) and Honda Toshiaki (1744–1821), were already anticipating by almost a century the geo-political ideas that Japan's prosperity and security required the domination of North-east Asia, defined then to include Manchuria, China, and the South Seas areas. At the time these ideas were enunciated, Japan could not possibly have implemented them. For this reason, Shimizu has described them as "rather

utopian and romantic" (p. 6), perhaps rather unfairly, considering the fact that those who took Japan down the road to the Second World War had broadly the same geo-political-strategic vision when they pronounced the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere".

Because these late Tokugawa writers were dismissed as romantic utopians, Shimizu has unavoidably considered as historically significant only the "Nanshin Ron" of modern Japan, beginning with the mid-Meiji era, when "Nanshin Ron" was regarded as having some influence in shaping political thinking in Japan.

The second important period lasted from the end of the Meiji era through the early years of the Taisho (*c.* 1910–18). During these years, "Nanshin Ron" began to incorporate ideas of territorial expansion, unlike that of the Meiji years, when it tended to see the South Seas as important to Japan as a rising maritime power, but left vague or undiscussed the means to turn the South Seas into an area for Japanese colonization and trade.

Indeed, "Nanshin Ron" was only a minor undercurrent in the mainstream of Japanese ideas of their manifest destiny as a Pacific nation. The focus was on China and Japan. But after the Japanese annexation of Taiwan in 1895, the writers of "Nanshin Ron", unlike their predecessors, had a power base, and included writers in the Japanese establishment, notably the governors-general of Taiwan.

"Nanshin Ron" became part of officialdom and, after the Russo-Japanese War, developed into an aspect of national defence thinking. In 1907, it was officially adopted by the Japanese cabinet. Official "Nanshin Ron" was definitely expansionist, but was more concerned with the mainland than the South Seas. The ideas of expansion into the South Seas had private beginnings in the Taisho period, but the publication and dissemination of these ideas had governmental encouragement, receiving a fillip with the Japanese occupation of the German Pacific islands during the First World War.

During 1919–30, "Nanshin Ron" writings were on the wane, but readers will question Shimizu for attributing the decline to "a sudden fall of international prices" (p. 33). But they persisted in the more significant form of official and semi-official writings and research papers that eventually blossomed into officially accepted thinking in the early Showa period (*c.* 1930–43). After 1935, Southeast Asia became "an official area of projected Japanese development and concern (p. 36) . . . indispensable for industrial development and defence (p. 37)". With the publication of the popular work "Nanshin Ron" in 1936 by Murobuse Koshin, the idea was spread that expansion into Southeast Asia was "Japan's destiny . . . an inevitable mission and a historical necessity" (p. 39).

The rest is familiar history, but Shimizu's contribution to it is how the

various strands of "Nanshin Ron" developed from the Meiji period and became woven into the concept of Japan's "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere". Shimizu has taken pains to demonstrate that the idea of territorial acquisition in the development of "Nanshin Ron" only developed in the early Taisho period, and that the use of force to fulfil this ambition only germinated in the early Showa period. But it is also obvious that, since the late Tokugawa period, there was a fundamental continuity in Japanese ideas about Japan as a nation in the Pacific Ocean. Japan was seen as a maritime power with a destiny to lead Asia against Western dominance, and the limits of its influence included China, Korea, Manchuria, Mongolia, and Nanyo, defined at different times and by different authors to include not only present-day Southeast Asia but frequently also the South Pacific Islands, Australia, India, and New Zealand.

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