

# Mamiya Rinzo and the Japanese Exploration of Sakhalin Island: Cartography and Empire

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Maps can be powerful tools of nation building and empire, and therefore powerful historical sources. Whether they delineate tidal patterns, measure altitude, chart seafloors, identify ethnic communities, or bind nations, maps provide a potent lens through which people view the world and, in turn, spatially contextualize their experiences. Because of their power as historical sources, maps also serve as useful pedagogical devices when teaching about Japan. Recently, major research universities have pushed the importance of “original” undergraduate research. This is complicated if the student’s interest is Tokugawa Japan, because archival documentation is notoriously difficult to read. Maps, however, offer an alternative. Of course, maps – particularly pre-modern maps drawn before the global spread of the cartographic sciences – contain marginal text; but because they are visual sources, they can, with the aid of an adept teacher, appeal to the creative inclinations of a notoriously visually oriented generation. Students learn that maps often represent – and often even drive – major historical events. This is certainly true of the maps drawn by Mamiya Rinzô, a collection of beautifully preserved pieces held at the Resource Collection for Northern Studies (Hoppô Shiryô Shitsu) at Hokkaido University.

Because they are such rich sources, and because there are so many kinds, maps can be interpreted in numerous ways. They can depict cadastral surveys; they can also depict Buddhist cosmologies. Bruno Latour argued that maps, when crafted by European imperialists according to the “language of science,” and then dispatched to “centers of calculation,” concentrated scientific knowledge in the hands of imperial states. In this process, local “beliefs” (of native groups) were transformed into normative “knowledge” to be deployed by European states in elaborate colonial projects. Indeed, with the crafting of maps according to the language of science, the “implicit” understanding of locals became “explicit” information used in Europe’s capital cities; and “local” ways of knowing succumbed to European “universal” knowledge. In this manner, maps were stable and movable inscriptions that charted the pathways and borders of the colonial enterprise. Michael Bravo, by contrast, has cautioned that even “stable, portable” maps, ones drawn according to the language of science, need to be seen as the results of the cross-cultural production of knowledge. European mapmakers negotiated with locals for access to geographical information. Even as the product of cross-cultural negotiations, however, they still proved compelling tools in the anticipation and creation of empire.

J.B. Harley argued that maps represent a kind of historical language, one that speaks as loudly as written documents. Sometimes they can speak even louder. Maps can be tricky, however, because, as a product of cartography, they can be disguised as just another

“valueless” or “objective” science. Historians have become adept at interrogating and deconstructing written documents, but they have proven less adept at exposing the “historically specific codes” contained in maps. Because maps serve as an “authoritative” resource, one often controlled by the state, they were used to delineate nations and anticipate empires. That is, as Daniel Clayton writes, maps provided the scientific “geopolitical framework” for colonial projects. Mostly, they provided a “geopolitical framework” for nineteenth-century European powers; but China and Japan also deployed modern maps to anticipate their empires.

In this article, which appeared in the *Journal of Historical Geography*, I argue that early modern Japanese maps, specifically those drafted by Mamiya Rinzô (1775-1844) and Inô Tadataka (1745-1818), function in multiple capacities and, therefore, contain layers of “historically specific codes” that, if contextualized properly, enhance our understanding of Japanese history and, more broadly, East Asian history. To begin with, maps by Mamiya and Inô served as spatial parallels of an emerging “national consciousness” in Japan, one that was taking place in “nativist” (*kokugaku*) discursive communities around the country. These national maps, which traced the coastal boundaries of Japan, bound the abstract “collective memory” (as Eiko Ikegami describes it) or the “library of public information” (as Mary Elizabeth Berry describes it) that emerged in the late eighteenth century. In other words, if for “nativist” scholars, imagining the nation meant “restoring” the emperor to power through the study of ancient texts and poems, for cartographers such as Mamiya and Inô, it meant geographically binding (according to global, normative cartographic standards), and thereby delineating, the physical country called Japan. Cartographers, too, imagined the nation, only they did so with maps.



**Records of exploration of the Sakhalin and "Todatsu" (eastern Siberia) regions in 1808-09 (Bunka 5, 6) by Mamiya Rinzo, which were presented to the Tokugawa Shogunate**

Maps also hastened Japan’s thrust into the modern age and, by anticipating empire and emptying foreign lands of their native inhabitants, facilitated later Japanese colonial projects in the North Pacific. Modern, scientific maps emptied lands of peoples, sequestering this information (peoples’ customs [*fûzoku*], for example) in illustrated ethnographies. Hence, maps vacated foreign lands, preparing them for occupation. Maps also brought foreign lands to the “centers of calculation,” among which Edo (and Tokyo), not only European capitals, must be included. Maps were brought to Tokugawa policymakers in Edo such as the astronomer Takahashi Kageyasu (1785-1829), who sought information on the borders that separated Japan, Russia, and the Qing Empire. Maps provided Takahashi with a “geopolitical framework,” one different from the Sinocentric tributary order that had dominated East Asian geopolitics for centuries. In essence, Takahashi sought a more modern way of looking at the world. Maps also facilitated the Japanese response to European imperialism by marking the boundaries of Japan in a language that Europeans understood, the language of science; but maps also facilitated Japan’s

nineteenth-century move into Sakhalin Island and beyond by anticipating empire.

This article explores these facets of early modern maps, and many others, including where these two mapmakers came from and what their activities tell us about early modern Japanese society. It also narrates the travels of Mamiya and his Sakhalin guides (Mamiya's partners in the cross-cultural production of cartographic knowledge), as they trod through these cold, northern territories, naming mountains (and thereby possessing them), surveying forests and fisheries (for future exploitation), and tracing the coastline of Sakhalin Island and beyond. Often, historians of Japan reserve discussion of the scientific mapping and surveying of foreign lands for the post-Meiji experience, when Japan imported the modern methods of nation building, industrialization, science, and imperialism.

What the maps of Mamiya and Inô demonstrate is that Japan's lurch into the modern age predates the Meiji Restoration, as does Japan's emergence as an East Asian imperial power.

To read the article click [here](#)

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