

Book Review

Kären Wigen. *A Malleable Map: Geographies of Restoration in Central Japan 1600-1912.*

Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.

340 pp. (ISBN 9780520272767)

Kären Wigen's *A Malleable Map* chronicles the ways in which depictions of the central Japanese region of Shinano, including the portion that is modern Nagano prefecture, changed over roughly four centuries. Specifically, Wigen focuses on how the relationship between regional and national identities “played an integral role in the creation of modern Japan” (19). She argues that pictorial and non-pictorial modes of Shinano cartography redefined spatial conceptions of place according to the needs and priorities of Tokugawa shoguns, merchants, Meiji officials, travelers, scholars, etc. *A Malleable Map* examines how certain groups’ recognition of processes (e.g., sericulture and papercraft) that comprised a “protoindustrial enterprise” signified cartographic features of Shinano (89 and 157). The appearance of “protoindustrial enterprise” on maps, in turn, reflected larger economic and political changes in Japan from the Tokugawa period through the Meiji. *A Malleable Map* narrates the role cartography played in Japan becoming a modern nation.

Wigen begins with an exploration of how Kyoto and Edo—Japan's traditional centers of power—viewed Shinano in relation to Japan as a whole. Maps centered on Kyoto illustrated Shinano as a part of a distant periphery. By contrast, maps centered on Edo portrayed this province as an adjacent region. The close proximity of

Shinano signified heightened relevancy to the Edo regime vis-à-vis military security, trade, and cultural perceptions. These maps exemplify how geographical depictions of regions—also known as chorography—changed across time. Wigen differentiates this theme of regional viewpoints with an extended examination of the *kumiezu* (i.e., a map of Japanese provinces) commissioned by and for the shogun. This map embodies centrality and cohesion, thus supporting her argument that places on maps can be viewed from a variety of perspectives. In outlining intricacies of the *kumiezu*, Wigen shows how “linear border[s]” and “familiar devices of framing” portrayed Shinano as a defined space (88).

Beyond noting the importance of regional proximity to centers of power, the author analyzes government statistics to indicate how the production of commodities like silk transformed Nagano’s economy. Her analysis centers on the notion that collections of statistics during the Meiji era focused on goods production for each province, thereby characterizing industry and the development of a modern state. Wigen also notes how Nagano teachers and newspapers later conveyed regional pride and unity by invoking old references to Shinano. As an editor of the *Shinano Daily News*, for example, Yamaji Aizan wrote a lengthy poem titled, “A History of Shinano Province in Verse,” which described Shinano as an imperial construction that coalesced as a result of the actions of Japanese emperors (215-216). Wigen contends that pride in Shinano often translated into pride in the Japanese nation. The book’s final chapters summarize Wigen’s argument concerning the Tokugawa-Meiji transition. She claims that the Meiji regime’s use of old regional characteristics enabled it to modernize while maintaining cohesion and order.

A Malleable Map contributes directly to the fields of geographic history, political history, and cultural history. In the case of geographic history, Wigen’s analysis of maps, legends, and gazetteers shows how and why the “place” of Shinano transitioned to Nagano. Wigen notes how *kuni* and *gun*—essentially provinces and

districts, respectively—remained as geographical reference points “for a millennium” (9-10). She believes that governments maintained districts of this nature to “infuse practical potency with symbolic potential” (11). Building on the concept of political efficiency, Wigen argues that governors of prefectures during the early Meiji period needed updated maps in order to collect taxes from semi-autonomous villagers and vassals. Thus, she shows how a political and logistical practice acquired geographic context. In terms of cultural history, the author integrates geography into the discussion of sustained and/or changing cultural values such as regional pride. The author references the 1879 *Shinano Daily Reporter* newspaper to show how individuals argued that Shinano represented Japanese civilization and national progress.

Wigen’s work contains a large number of maps, tables, and legends to support her argument pertaining to the diversity in Japanese depictions of the Shinano region and its neighbors across time. Nevertheless, the captions accompanying these maps are somewhat sparse. More detailed map descriptions would immensely aid individuals with limited experience in East Asian languages. Moreover, although the author makes a passing reference to the Tokugawa Institute for the Investigation of Barbarian Books, she does not integrate foreign maps of Japan into her discussion of the variety of graphical depictions of Shinano. Since Wigen asserts that maps are “malleable” and can be viewed from many perspectives, this inclusion might have added another dimension to her work.

A Malleable Map presents a novel assertion that the Meiji Restoration relied on adherence to Japan’s past geography to construct a new nation. Wigen traces the evolution of the Shinano/Nagano region through the Tokugawa and Meiji regimes, and places this evolution within the context of modern Japanese history. She argues that various individuals—from newspaper editors to Meiji modernizers—referenced the familiar in order to create a new conception of their country. Wigen’s ability to synchronize

modern and ancient themes in Japan's geography has resulted in a unique chorographical study. *A Malleable Map* employs an original approach that explores nationhood in a country rooted in both tradition and evolving geographical perceptions.

Reviewed by

Reed H. Chervin

Department of History,

University of Colorado Boulder