

Geographical Societies and Colonialism

Comparative Considerations of Italy and Japan

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In 1821, Société de Géographie de Paris (SGP) was founded, followed by Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zur Berlin (1828), the Geographical Society of London in 1830 (later the Royal Geographical Society, RGS) and several other geographical societies in main European and American cities. These societies typically advocated the promotion of geographical exploration and research and the diffusion of geographical knowledge. The foundation of these societies coincided with, and was shaped by, the emergence of a number of new trends in western civilization. These include: the appearance since the 18th century of new philosophical and scientific currents; the possibilities offered for the development of material culture by industrialization; the nascent system of colonialism and exploitation; and the new

responsibility imposed on the geographic discipline, especially on the teaching of geography in schools, to contribute to the formation of national identity within the emerging paradigm of the nation-state.

The nature and scope of the activities pursued by each of these newly established geographical societies were influenced by national and local circumstances. SGP, for example, was hampered by the lack of a financial base, due mainly to political instability, as well as by the lack of strong relationships with academic circles; as a result, throughout the 19th century SGP was unable to exert effective influence on the decision-making processes related to the colonial policies of the French government. The Russkoe Geograficheskoe Obshchestvo (RGO) (Russian Geographical Society), founded in 1845, in contrast, counted among its members a number of prominent academic geographers; it was very actively engaged in research related to Russia adjacent continental colonies (in what is now referred to as the “near abroad”) and made a number of proposals regarding their management. In Britain, the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) was on a solid financial footing and was able to sponsor numerous expeditions, especially in Africa. Through its efforts, it contributed greatly to enhancing the position of geography in the school curriculum and also to the establishment of chairs of geography at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The Berlin Society, headquartered in what was then a small state without colonial possessions, remained focused on the diffusion of geographical sciences; to this end, it organized several lectures by Alexander von Humboldt and Carl Ritter. Even after 1880, the Berlin Society did not cooperate nearly as actively with the colonial policies of the Second Reich when compared with the geographical societies of other late-joiners in the “game of empire.”

In the final years of the 19th and the early years of 20th century, all these geographical societies underwent radical transformation in character and orientation of their activities. The National Geographic Society, headquartered in Washington, D.C., had become the publisher of one of an immensely popular photogravure magazine, which provided the resources for making continued financial contributions to support geographical research. But this was the exception. Most geographical societies during this period took on a more academic or scientific character, and this change was particularly reflected in their publishing activities. The American Geographical Society of New York is still today publisher of one of the leading academic journals in the field, *Geographical Review*. In 1934, an academic association comprised mainly of university geographers, the Institute of British Geographers, was founded in the United Kingdom; but in the 1980s the Royal Geographical Society absorbed this academic association to become RGS with IBG. While the changing characters of geographical societies since the end of the 19th century have been multifarious and merit further comparative studies, that is not my task today and I would like to return to my comparison of geographical societies in Italy and Japan.

La Società Geografica Italiana (SGI) was founded in 1867, only six years after the unification of Italy, in Florence, then capital of the Kingdom of Italy. Together with the Real Sociedad Geografica, founded in 1876 in Madrid, SGI typifies the role played by the geographical societies of late-arriving imperial powers in formulating colonial policies. In some cases SGI stepped out ahead of and anticipated official government decisions in colonial affairs.

In Japan, the Tokyo Chigaku Kyokai (TCK) (Tokyo Geographical Society) was founded in 1879, virtually the only geographical society founded in the 19th century in the purely non-Western world. (The other exception would be Société de Géographie d'Égypte, founded in 1875 as an independent organization, but which in fact served as a base for European explorers in search of the sources of Nile.) The TCK was founded at a time when the predominant current in Japan was one of “civilization through Westernization”; some founding members had been member of the RGS and other geographical societies of Europe, and the statute and the activities of the TCK were modeled on those of Western geographical societies. As was the case in the West, members of the TCK were drawn mainly from the social elite, aristocrats, government and military officials, and journalists. The TCK was financially supported by high admission and membership fees as well as donations from the Imperial court.

Over time, foreign countries came to figure as the subject of an increasing number of the lectures the TCK organized; after 1890, when Japan officially become an “empire” under its new constitution, there was particular focus on regions that were seen as potentially within the sphere of influence of Imperial Japan: Asia and the Pacific islands. Before the absorption, in 1893, of the Chigaku-kai, a learned society established in 1878 by professors and graduates of the Imperial university with reduced membership fees for academicians, the TCK had only very limited academic membership.

From its founding up until the end of World War II, the entire output of the TCK—papers read at its meetings or carried in *Chigaku zasshi* (The Journal of Geography) or other publications—was strongly influenced by the policies of economic and the military expansion pursued by Imperial Japan. After the Sino-Japanese war (1894–95), the TCK sponsored geological and geographical researches in Asia-Pacific regions and on several occasions compiled special issues of The Journal of Geography dedicated to these regions. In this context, the geological surveys of China conducted by the TCK from 1910 to 1921, stand out. While clearly intended to enable the exploitation of China’s mineral resources by Imperial Japan, the quality of scientific research embodied in these surveys—up to the highest international standards of the times—needs also to be acknowledged.

While the activities of the TCK were certainly influenced by the colonialist policies of

Imperial Japan, from its founding it was, *par excellence*, a circle of socialites rather than a lobby or pressure group for specific economic or political interests. Map-making and geographical surveys for military operations were the competence of the Survey Section of the General Staff Office within Japan's military establishment, and the TCK played no active role in this. In sharp contrast with the Royal Geographical Society in Great Britain, the TCK did virtually nothing to encourage the teaching of geography in Japan. Moreover, when Tokyo was struck by a devastating earthquake in 1923, the office building housing the TCK, with all its library and archival materials, was destroyed in the resulting fire. In the 1930s the Research Section of the South Manchuria Railway Company (a key player in realizing Japan's expansionist policies on the Asian continent) conducted studies that were of much greater detail and scientific rigor than those conducted by the TCK, and thus of more direct service to colonial policies.

From the first years of the 20th century, the activities of the TCK clearly became more academically oriented. At the same time, however, we have to note that geography was not yet fully established as an academic discipline in Japan and professional geographers were (and still are) only a minority within the membership of the TCK, notwithstanding its official English name, Tokyo Geographical Society. Questions of political and social geography constituted only very minor topics for the TCK in the 1930s and 40s: although a considerable number of Japanese geographers of that period, especially those influenced by Karl Haushofer, were giving their attention to geopolitical questions, only two papers of geopolitical focus appeared in the TCK journal *Chigaku zasshi* during this period. This was in complete contrast to the organs of other geographical societies, such as *Bollettino* of the Reale Società Geografica Italiana (RSGI).

As mentioned, RSGI's predecessor, SGI was one of the important protagonists of Italian colonial expansionism in Africa, especially after its transfer to Rome in 1872; in the years following the opening of Suez Canal, which effectively made the Red Sea an extension of the Mediterranean, SGI organized numerous expeditionary mission, with special attention paid to East Africa—present day Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia. SGI acted as the vanguard for the construction of Italian colonies in Africa—a risky enterprise which necessarily took a great toll in lives of the “explorers” (see attached chronological table). The number of exploration missions sent to Africa by SGI nearly equaled that of the British RGS. Within Italy, SGI functioned as a powerful pressure group shaping the process of colonial policy-making. Two of the organization's presidents, Cesare Correnti (president: 1873–1879) and Giacomo Doria (1891–1900) were actively involved in substantive decision-making related to colonial affairs.

In 1905, the Italian Colonial Congress was organized at Asmara, under the leadership of A. di San Giuliano, who was later for a brief period president of SGI. Based on the resolution of

the Asmara congress, in 1906 Istituto Coloniale Italiano (renamed Istituto Italiano per Africa after the end of World War II and, after 1995, a part of Istituto Italiano per Africa e Oriente) was founded, an event that was to fundamentally transform the nature of SGI and its work. Research and overseas missions directly related to colonial policy became the competence of this new institution and, after 1912, of the newly created Ministry of Colonies. Despite the fact that a number of the presidents of SGI through the end of World War II were former Ministers of Colonies, the missions dispatched by SGI took on a steadily more scientific character. Many academic geographers of the first half of the 20th century—G. Danielli, R. Almagià, D. Gribaudi, E. Scarin among them—gained field experience in their formative years as geographers under the sponsorship of SGI (RSGI) when they were dispatched on research missions to the newly-acquired Italian colonial and semi-colonial lands of Cyrenaica, Tripolitania, the Dodecanese Islands and Albania.

Thus in the first years of the 20th century, like many other geographical societies, SGI underwent a transformation. Changing its name to Reale Società Geografica Italiana (RSGI) in 1912, its involvement in colonialism took more indirect form in the guise of the praxis of the professional geographers who were members of SGI (RSGI) or Società di Studi Geografici (an academic association for geographical studies founded in 1895 in Florence as Società di Studi Geografici e Coloniali before that, Sezione Fiorentina della Società Africana d' Italia). SGI (RSGI) thus played a comparable, if more limited, role in involving geographers in colonialism relative to that played by the RGS in Britain and other European geographical societies (the relationship between geographers and empire in the United States was in some ways unique).

Under the fascist regime, SGI remained a more influential institution than the TCK was under Japanese militarism. When, in 1926, SGI held an opening ceremony for its offices in the Palazzo Mattei in Villa Celimontana in Rome, acquired the year before, Mussolini was in attendance. This building is one of the biggest and the most magnificent head office of any geographical society and today, along with serving as the headquarters for SGI, hosts the seat of the European Association of Geographers and the Archives of the International Geographical Union.

In Japan, because of the relative weakness of geography as a scientific discipline and of geographers within the membership of the TCK, the TCK did not act as an effective channel for the involvement of the geographers in colonialism. Rather, a more limited number of geographers engaged themselves by, for example, contributing geopolitical monographs to small-circulation journals and collaborating directly with the General Staff Office or with colonial and military authorities overseas. After WWII, these geographers were purged from public service at the order of the Supreme Commander for Allied Powers.

My story, I am afraid, ends there. In my survey of the literature, I have yet to come across any socio-historical analysis by a Japanese researcher of Japanese geographical societies and associations in the context of geographers' involvement in Japanese colonialism.

I am well aware of the difficulties involved in studying this issue. Many of those directly involved have already passed from the scene without leaving any record of their activities. Also, an enormous volume of documents was burned by the Japanese military authorities during the two-week "vacuum" between the acceptance of the Potsdam Declaration on 14 August 1945 and the arrival of the first American troops in Tokyo on 28 August. Notwithstanding these difficulties I am committed to pursuing this avenue of research.