



Struggles with globalization: the integration of Japan into the UPU in the late 19th century

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Multilateral diplomacy and international conferences were new concepts for Japanese diplomacy in the Meiji era (1868–1912), in parallel with Japan’s modernization. At the same time, the Universal Postal Union, established in 1874 – making it the second oldest international organization – became a leading actor of globalization in the late 19th century. Constructing a unified postal network has been an arduous but fundamental effort to promote globalization ever since the 19th century. However, unlike other practical facilities such as telecommunication systems and transport infrastructures, there was little literature concerning the development of the global postal network from the perspectives of non-Western countries. This research examines Japan’s involvement in the UPU, supported by a wide variety of historical documents from both Japan and the UPU, using in part the multi-archival approach.

Two related subjects will be discussed. The first is the circumstances of Japan’s entry into the UPU in 1877. The process of ratification of the UPU treaty shows Japan’s recognition of international organizations and clarifies the communication between legations and the central government. Files concerning Japan’s entry into the UPU, stored in the UPU archives and in Japanese archives, demonstrate the struggles and achievements of Japanese diplomats in Western countries at that time, especially Aoki Shuzo, the Minister in Germany, Ueno Kagenori, the Minister in Great Britain, and Sameshima Naonobu, the Minister in France.

The second topic focuses on Japan’s involvement with the second, third, and fourth Postal Congresses, held in 1878 (Paris), 1885 (Lisbon), and 1891 (Vienna) respectively. It clarifies the attitude of the Japanese government towards an international organization, the UPU. The members of the Japanese delegation for each Congress reflect the recognition of, and priority given to, the UPU and foreign postal services in the context of Japan’s diplomacy. Comparing the history of Japan’s foreign postal services and the consequences of each Postal Congress gives us a picture of how the UPU’s activities influenced Japan’s policymaking and postal modernization.

Like other non-European countries, Japan struggled to integrate into the global economy whilst maintaining its independence from the Western powers. The UPU aimed to realize a worldwide “postal territory” and was thus apt to include modernizing countries for practical purposes. Furthermore, the Japan–UPU relationship at that time provides a good example for examining the development of Japan’s diplomatic activities in overcoming the differences in languages, cultures, and behaviours. How and what Japanese diplomats and delegation members communicated with other diplomatic missions and the Japanese central government was directly related to Japan’s involvement in the UPU’s activities. In this context, Japan’s struggle in the late 19th century as part of the UPU offers new perspectives on the expansion of the global postal network, demonstrating the impact of the UPU’s activities, and its attitude towards countries other than Western nations.