

THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS AND THE 1931-33 CRISIS: THE REJECTION OF JAPANESE PROPAGANDA

In this class we will review Japan's propaganda effort on China, focusing on the Manchurian Crisis of 1931-33, and examine the reasons for Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations in February 1933, its isolation and the increasingly defiant tone of Japanese propaganda.

1. REVIEW: A CHRONOLOGY OF JAPANESE PROPAGANDA

THE *GAIMUSHŌ JŌHŌBU* [外務省情報部] began operations in April 1921 as a department within the *Gaimushō*. Its purpose was to present a favourable image of Japan to the world, and within Japan. Its institutional successors were the *Naikaku Jōhōiinkai* (1936) and the *Naikaku Jōhōkyoku* (1940). During the twenty years 1921-1941, Japanese propaganda and the organisation and collection of Japanese news became increasingly professional and effective, extending the Japanese viewpoint into East Asia and beyond. At the same time Japan's international relations came under increasing strain, and a more aggressive 'young Officers' group came to dominate the *Gaimushō*.

SITUATION	Propaganda agency	News agency
1890s-1921 Informal arrangements in China, Korea and the USA	<i>Gaimushō</i> : but no propaganda dept.	Reuters and, after 1913, Kokusai
1921-26 Shidehara diplomacy: Japan makes her case through well-financed propaganda and economic foreign policy, with some takeovers	<i>Gaimushō Jōhōbu</i>	Kokusai Tsūshinsha
1926-1932 Cold War: Newspaper takeovers, subsidies for journalists and Japanese news agencies. After 1931 Manchurian Incident, a huge increase in propaganda and the China news effort. But in October 1932, the Lytton Report rejects the case made in Japanese propaganda and questions Japan's national integrity.	<i>Gaimushō Jōhōbu</i>	Nihon Shimbun Rengōsha (Rengō)
1933-1941 Endgame: In 1933 Japan walks out of the League of Nations, attempts a takeover of all media operations in China, and amalgamates newspapers and tightens press control in Japan. In 1936, Cabinet control of propaganda increases and the Dōmei news agency begins. By late 1940, there are few independent press organs in any language in Japan, China or Korea and cabinet control of news and propaganda is almost complete.	Naikaku Jōhōiinkai (1936); <i>Naikaku Jōhōbu</i> (1937); Naikaku Jōhōkyoku (1940)	1936: Dōmei Tsūshinsha (Dōmei).
1941-1945 Wartime press: Considerable media control in East Asia (but Japan fails to establish a Japanese-language press in newly conquered territories).	Naikaku Jōhōkyoku (1940)	Dōmei

2. THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS AND THE 1931-33 CRISIS: THE REJECTION OF JAPANESE PROPAGANDA

THE DEBATE ON MANCHOUKUO

Manchoukuo became a geopolitical reality on 20 September 1931, the day after the main cities of Manchuria had been occupied by the Kwantung Army (*Kantōgun*). On 25 September the *Manchuria Daily News* announced the establishment of a 'committee for restoring normal status and preserving order in and about Mukden'. Over the following month, Chinese officials were appointed to serve on what the *Manchuria Daily News* described as 'independence regimes' and 'self-government committees' while the Western press spoke of 'puppet regimes'. According to Honjō Shigeru, Commander of the Kwantung Army:

The movement to set up a new government has been started everywhere in Manchuria and Mongolia. While the Chinese people are drawn to the Japanese Army because of its strict discipline, none of them has manifested a wish to have old heads back over on them. The accumulation of the long suppressed indignation must have burst at length against the old warlords.



In March 1932, Japan formally established the new state of Manchoukuo (*Manshūkoku*), with its capital at Changchun (Hsinking), and its own ruler, Puyi, who would be crowned emperor of Manchoukuo two years later. In September 1932, Japan became the first nation to recognise the new state, followed by its future 'Axis' partners, Italy in 1937 and Germany in 1938. In December 1931, the League of Nations appointed the "Lytton Commission" to investigate and report on the situation in China. In October 1932, the Commission published its Report. Between these two dates, the Foreign Ministry network embarked on a massive propaganda effort to persuade the international community to see the Manchurian

Incident and the invasion of Shanghai in January-March 1932 in positive terms.

In China, the Foreign Ministry network gathered witnesses and testimonials, preparing the ground ahead of the Lytton Commission's fact-finding journeys from Tokyo to Kyoto and Shanghai to Manchoukuo. Planners in Tokyo selected spokesmen and gathered material for Japan's case in the forthcoming dénouement in Geneva. The Foreign Ministry network was ready to use every tool at hand: explanation, persuasion, detailed argument, image-laden rhetoric.

In some respects, Japanese propaganda abroad contradicted the domestic messages on *kokutai* [国体] and Japan's divine mission used at home. Rather than emphasize Japan's military power in China, the Foreign Ministry network tried to convey a more positive impression of Japan as a powerful modern state, as East Asia's natural leader, with its showcase in Manchoukuo.

Japan's 'Asian leader' image went back to 1894-1905 when the victories over China and Russia and the publication of Nitobe Inazō's *Bushido* provided a seamless connection between studious exaltation and right over might. As the Italian spy and Fascist Amleto de Vespa put it in 1938, 'British Tories helped create this myth of a heroic Japan; and behind the myth has matured a monster Frankenstein that threatens those who helped to create it'. Victory in its wars with Russia and China made 'brave little Japan' a Western favourite and its role as the Asian colonizer of Asia seemed well-deserved. By 1938, this 'monster Frankenstein' had grown enormously in the public mind in Britain, and Vespa's publisher was the Left Book Club. In twenty years, Japan had gone from Tory pin-up to bipartisan demon and 'bushido' had become a bad joke.

3. PRESENTING JAPAN'S CASE ON MANCHOUKUO / MANCHURIA

THE FOREIGN MINISTRY NETWORK SPOKESMEN AND PUBLICISTS EMPHASIZED FIVE KEY POINTS:

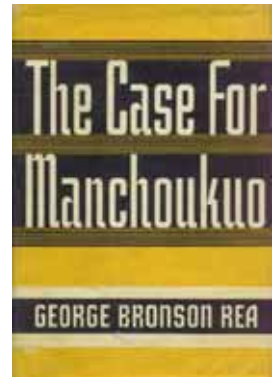
- 1. That Manchuria's links with China were weak; that Manchuria was distinct from China.**
 - 2. That China was a failed state. The Chinese were incapable of ruling themselves and could not be described as an 'organised people' nor China as 'an organised state' within the terms of the Covenant of the League of Nations.**
 - 3. That Japan's reaction to the (Manchurian Incident of) 18 September 1931 was a normal act of self-defence.**
 - 4. That the state of Manchoukuo was not a Japanese 'puppet' but the result of a genuine, spontaneous, popular independence movement by the people of Manchuria.**
 - 5. That Japan was the victim of anti-foreign feeling stirred up by Guomindang propaganda.**
- 1.** The first of these points was made in scholarly books and articles published in Japan. The *Manchuria Daily News* in Dairen (Dalian) was the main FM network organ pushing this point.
- 2.** The notion of China as a failed state was the foundation of most Japanese and pro-Japanese thinking, and was subscribed to by many Western settlers and commentators in China, some of whom believed that Japan offered the best solution to Chinese 'chaos' and 'incompetence'. All the publicists on Japan's Geneva team subscribed to this view. Other journalists promoted this view outside Geneva: Miles Vaughn, Rodney Gilbert, and H.G.W. Woodhead. The support of these Western writers helped make point two an effective argument in Japan's favour at Geneva.
- 3.** The third point, that the Manchurian Incident was an act of normal self-defense, was difficult to argue. As the United States learned in Vietnam and now Iraq, it's difficult to claim that you are acting in 'self-defence' when your armies are on foreign soil.
- 4.** The journalists and spokesmen of the Foreign Ministry network had to persuade the world and the League of Nations that the Chinese people were delighted with the transformation of poverty-stricken, bandit-ridden Manchuria into safe, well-ordered Manchoukuo. Who wouldn't prefer order to chaos, even if it was imposed by force? Some gave Japan the benefit of the doubt.
- 5.** Japan complained to the League of Nations about Guomindang distortions of Sino-Japanese history in the textbooks used in schools under nationalist control. Japan cited anti-Japanese publications, complaining that they created ill-feeling and made it difficult for the Japanese army to gain the trust of ordinary Chinese. (Japan also objected to Communist propaganda in China but since that was as much anti-Guomindang as it was anti-Japanese, Japanese spokesmen focused their attack on the Guomindang, which was also fighting the Communists).

4. THE FOREIGN MINISTRY NETWORK PICKS ITS PUBLICITY TEAM

To reverse its loss of image and reclaim Japan's earlier position as the natural leader in East Asia, Japan hired a group of Western journalists as spokesmen. Chief among them were: Henry Kinney of the South Manchuria Railway, George Gorman, editor of the *Manchuria Daily News*, and George Bronson Rea ► of the *Far Eastern Review*. In early 1933, Rea was hired by the government of Manchoukuo at a salary of \$30,000 p.a. Rea opened an office



in Washington (where, 'he will represent Manchukuo officially as far as Manchukuo is concerned but unofficially, or not at all, as far as the United States is concerned', commented the *Japan Chronicle* ◀. The journalist Frederick Moore, a Foreign Ministry



consultant since the early 1920s, and the Briton Arthur Edwardes, who in the autumn of 1932 was appointed an adviser and London agent to the government of Manchoukuo at a salary of £5,000 per annum, also joined Japan's publicity team. Between the autumn of 1932 and the spring of 1933, at the height of the Manchoukuo debate at the League of Nations, Kinney, Rea, Penlington, Moore and Edwardes travelled to Geneva to lobby the League on Japan's behalf.

4. THE REJECTION OF JAPANESE INTEGRITY

IN OCTOBER 1932, the League of Nations published the Report of the Lytton Commission. In its conclusions, the Report reflected a conscious effort by the Commission and leading opinion at the League to placate Japanese sentiment by blaming both Japan and China for the situation in China. However, despite its conciliatory language and the scope it seemed to offer Japan for manoeuvre, the Report directly challenged each of the five key points in Japan's case for its actions and presence in Manchuria. The Report maintained that Manchuria was an integral part of China; that China was not a failed state; that Japan's reaction to the explosion of 18 September 1931 was not a normal act of self-defence; that the founding of Manchoukuo could not be considered the result of a genuine and spontaneous independence movement, and that Japan could not be properly described as a victim of anti-foreign feeling, whether incited by the Guomindang and their propaganda, or by other agencies or nations.

As Japan's representative, arguing against these conclusions, Matsuoka Yōsuke's 8 December speech to the League blurred the lines between those like himself whose task it was to present Japan's case in foreign policy terms, and those whose task it was to create and present Japan's case as propaganda:

Manchoukuo, when fully developed, will form the corner-stone of peace in the Far East – that is our faith. If, Gentlemen, you wish to know more about Manchoukuo, I can inform you that there are in Geneva three gentlemen connected with the Manchoukuo Government. One is General Tinge, personal representative of the Chief Executive of Manchoukuo; another is George Bronson Rea, Counsellor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who is regarded as

one of the greatest authorities on Far-Eastern affairs; and the third is Mr. Arthur H. Edwardes, formerly Inspector-General of the Maritime Customs of China, who has accepted the position of Adviser to the Manchoukuo Government. (TMQ: 159).¹

Matsuoka was one of the most media-conscious politicians of his day. There is no question of his ability to distinguish between foreign policy pronouncements and propaganda, between diplomacy and 'public diplomacy', but at Geneva he seems to have left it in abeyance. In late November 1932, Matsuoka had asked Eamonn de Valera, the new President of the League Council, to allow 'General Tinge' (Ding Shiyuan), Manchoukuo's first minister, and Rea to appear before the Council to present Japan's case for Manchoukuo, and been turned down.² Now he was all for bringing them back.

Like most of the early Manchoukuo Chinese officials, Ding Shiyuan was a discredited stooge. George Bronson Rea was a classic poacher turned gamekeeper, China's chief representative in Washington during the Twenty-One Demands crisis, then Japan's most durable foreign publicist following his conversion at the Paris Peace Conference. Like Rea, Arthur Edwardes had been personally frustrated by Chinese Nationalists, in his case the Guomindang, who had dismissed him as Inspector General of the Chinese Maritime Customs after less than a year in post. His responsibilities boiled down to propagandizing for Manchoukuo and getting British companies to invest there (Best 1999: 228-9).

For all his sensitivity to international opinion, Matsuoka's willingness to have these three speak for Japan on Manchoukuo seems naïve at best and points to a blind spot in his understanding of Western perceptions. Japanese propaganda had conspicuously failed to convey the validity of Japan's case on Manchuria but Matsuoka encouraged those who 'wish to know more about Manchoukuo' to consult its propagandists. His offer was consistent with Japan's presentation of Manchoukuo as a valid, independent state, but in the context of a discussion centred on that very validity, it confused the issue and highlighted the gulf between Japanese convictions and Western perceptions.

Matsuoka was bound to cast doubt on the credibility of China, whose government he referred to as a 'fiction'. His 8 December speech questioned the neutrality of the League and pointed to a pro-China bias in the Lytton Report's acceptance of Chinese opinion:

The Commission, declining to accept the solemn declarations of the Japanese government and attaching too little value to the detailed documents presented by them have...apparently listened to the opinion of unidentified persons and given credence to letters and communications of doubtful or unknown origin. (TMQ: 95).

Here was 'anti-Japanese propaganda' again. Matsuoka and the other Japanese delegates clearly resented the Commission's refusal to grant 'credence' to pro-Japanese public opinion and to the Japanese version of events. It seemed there was no ducking the issue but instead Japan recommended that the League consult with its authorized storytellers.

On 24 February 1933, after extensive efforts to find a way out for Japan, forty-two of the forty-four member nations in the League voted to accept the findings of the Lytton Report.

Acceptance posed a huge challenge to Japan. All the main points in Japan's case for being in China and for creating Manchoukuo had been broadcast in years of propaganda. Now, directly contradicting Japan's entire propaganda effort on China, the League's acceptance of the Report presented Japan not only with the impossibility of gaining diplomatic recognition for Manchukuo, but the virtually unanimous international rejection of Japan's integrity as a nation. On 24 February 1933, Matsuoka Yōsuke began the process of withdrawal with a dramatic walkout from the Council chamber. It is reported that, once outside and facing the press, Matsuoka dramatically lit a cigar and puffed on it with a satisfied air, although in fact it failed to light. On his return to Japan, he became a national hero. On the world stage he was seen as a wily and erratic but dangerous wrecker.

5. "MANCHOUKUO" BECOMES A *FAIT ACCOMPLI*

In the January 1934 issue of his new monthly review, *Oriental Affairs*, H.G.W. Woodhead maintained his support for Manchoukuo, urging international recognition on the basis that non-recognition only served to increase Japan's economic and political influence in the new state.³ *Oriental Affairs* was promptly denied the use of the postal service, a ban still in place in November, although the Foreign Office felt that 'if no fuss was made' the Chinese would probably lift it.⁴ In June, *The Times* reported that the ban, together with other censorship of the foreign press, was regarded in Shanghai 'as calculated to arouse the suspicion that the Government wishes to conceal disagreeable truths'.⁵ Nanking's ambassador to London was unrepentant and described *Oriental Affairs* as a 'pro-"Manchukuo"' mouthpiece'.⁶ On 27 June a question on the ban was tabled in the House of Commons. In November, Wang Jingwei, now Foreign Minister of the National government, said that he would support ending the ban and expressed interest in publishing Woodhead's *China Year Book* 'in collaboration' with Nanking.⁷

Early in 1934, *The Times* and AP correspondents were granted interviews with Puyi but, unlike Woodhead, they were not allowed to ask direct questions.⁸ In an interview with the *Sunday Express* in February the 'frail-looking bespectacled man in European morning clothes' was more forthcoming, with fond recollections of a youthful visit to Brighton where Gypsy Rose Lee had read his palm and predicted his ascension to "the Dragon Throne at Changchun in 1934". However, Puyi regretted that "Unfortunately, public opinion in your country has been sadly misled during the past two years and the friendly and constructive attitude of the Japanese government towards Manchuria has been made the pivot of racial hatreds."⁹ The enthronement ceremony on 1 March was attended by Edgar Snow, and Miles Vaughn and Frank Hedges came over from Tokyo.

After Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations in February 1933, Manchoukuo gained acceptance in some unexpected quarters. In April 1933, Edgar Snow privately acknowledged that the creation of Manchoukuo had redrawn the political map of East Asia as conceived at the Washington Conference. One could no longer 'think of Japan as an island power, but as a continental power, the strongest in Eastern Asia. Think of the center of Japan no longer as Tokyo, but Mukden or Hsinking' (Farnsworth 1996: 184). In 1934, Snow expanded on this view in the *Saturday Evening Post*.¹⁰

In May 1933, the *China Weekly Review* ran a series of articles on Manchoukuo in the context of Sino-Japanese relations. In one such, Wang Jingwei, currently President of the Executive Yuan, explained why the Guomindang would neither resist Japan militarily nor make overtures of peace, but would seek a diplomatic solution:

...although Japan seems to have lost the sympathy of the world in general, her military and economic position has been secured. On the other hand, while China has obtained the moral support of the world, militarily she is in an isolated position and economically she is helpless.¹¹

On 11 May 1933, the *Shanghai Evening Post & Mercury* began a series of articles by their news editor, C. Yates McDaniel, giving qualified support to Japan's position in Manchukuo:

If peace and security are maintained and the economic stabilization of the country assured, the great majority of the people will come to take less and less active interest in supporting or opposing whoever happens to be holding the reigns of power in Hsinking.

Later that year, Japan's 'accredited propagandist' Henry Kinney, quoted this article with approval in an unsolicited "Memorandum on Manchukuo" sent to the Foreign Office in London. One official seems to have been persuaded, reasoning that, 'it is difficult to dissent from its main conclusion, which is that Manchukuo is settling down to regular development under Japanese tutelage, and that any reversal of this development is impossible'.¹²

In February 1934, the British Residents Association in Shanghai voted in favour of recognition, citing Woodhead's January *Oriental Affairs* article as a factor in their decision.¹³ In August the *Manchuria Daily News* hailed the forthcoming visit of a British industrial commission to Manchoukuo as an indication that 'the old country still retains its practical outlook'.¹⁴ In September, fourteen journalists from American provincial newspapers visited Japan and Manchoukuo at the invitation of the Japan Press Association.¹⁵ In 1934, the word "Manchoukuo" was still being printed in Nanking in quotation marks, but it was on its way, if not to formal international recognition, then to international acceptance as a *fait accompli*.

¹ The speech is carried in full in *The Manchurian Question: Japan's Case in the Sino-Japanese Dispute as Presented to the League of Nations* (Geneva 1932. In O'Connor (ed.) Japanese Propaganda Series 2 (2005).

² Matsuoka Yōsuke dispatch to Foreign Ministry, no.38-1, received 23 November 1932.

³ "The Status of Manchukuo: The Question of Recognition": *Oriental Affairs*, January 1934, 8-10.

⁴ FO 371/18151 [F 6676/3927/10]: Harcourt-Smith note, 6 November 1934.

⁵ "Chinese Censorship": *The Times*, 23 June 1934.

⁶ FO 371/18151 [F 3927/3927/10]: Chinese ambassador to C.W. Orde, FO, 27 June 1934.

⁷ FO 371/18151 [F 7450/3927/10]: Report of meeting with Wang Jingwei, 3 November 1934; H. Cadogan, Nanking to H.G.W. Woodhead, 9 November 1934. Woodhead's asking price for the series he had nurtured since 1912 was \$40,000 but nothing more came of this possibility.

⁸ FO 371/18139 [F 1041/1041/10]: A.G. Major, Mukden, to FO, 5 February 1934.

-
- ⁹ “Mr. Pu Yi. The Man Who Re-ascends A Throne This Week Talks Exclusively To The “Sunday Express””: Sunday Express, 25 February 1934.
- ¹⁰ “Japan Builds a Colony”: Saturday Evening Post, No.206, 1934, 12-13.
- ¹¹ “Why We Resist”: CWR, 13 May 1933, 420-21.
- ¹² FO 371/17104 [F4106/283/10], A.W.G. Randall Minute of 26 June 1933 regarding Henry Kinney’s ‘Memorandum on Manchukuo’, dated 22 May 1933.
- ¹³ FO 371/18103 [F 2185/126/10]: J.F. Brennan, Shanghai, to Peking Legation, 10 February 1934.
- ¹⁴ “Great Britain”: MDN, 11 August 1934.
- ¹⁵ FO 371/18169 [F 6384/57/23]: R. Clive, Tokyo, to FO, 27 September 1934.