

7. THE MANCHURIAN INCIDENT AND THE FOUNDING OF A STATE

Japanese efforts stabilize Manchuria

One of the principal flaws of the IMTFE was the court's classification of the Manchurian Incident as the starting point of the 2nd Sino-Japanese War, and its complete dismissal of the events that led up to the incident.

I have already shown that the Manchurian Incident was a *consequence* of the friction and strife between Japan and China that persisted for a quarter century after the Russo-Japanese War.

By winning that war, Japan rescued Manchuria from the clutches of Russia. The Japanese laid the foundation for prosperity, building a railroad in the wilderness and establishing industries. It was the Japanese who breathed new life into Manchuria by building a modern civilization in a region that had been left to languish because of restrictive Qing policies. At the core of Manchurian progress was the South Manchuria Railway. After the 1911 Revolution, China proper was plagued by battles between various warlord factions, whose troops, numbering in the neighborhood of two million men, were constantly at each other's throats. When communist forces backed by the USSR infiltrated China, chaos and devastation became a seemingly endless blight. But north of Shanhai Pass it was a different story. The ravages of conflict so usual in China were nowhere to be seen in Manchuria, which developed into a peaceful, starkly contrasting preserve. It was an ideal confluence: order kept by only 10,000 men from Japan's Guandong Army, and the prayers of the Manchu people who were horrified by the strife in China proper, and who fervently desired *baojing anmin*. As many as one million Han per year from China proper, moved to Manchuria to escape that strife. In the autumn of 1927 Thomas W. Lamont, representing J.P. Morgan & Co., made an inspection tour of Manchuria. He described his observations in a letter to US Under Secretary of State Robert E. Olds, as follows:

My own observation ... is that today Manchuria is about the only stable region in all China and that with the Japanese there it is likely to be more of a stabilizing force in Chinese affairs than it is to be a disturbing element. The Japanese are developing Manchuria not chiefly in the military sense but in an economic way. They are doing this not for the benefit of the Japanese colonists who go to Manchuria in only small numbers. As a matter of fact, development is working out in the interest of the Chinese. With the unsettled and belligerent conditions covering so large a part of China, the Chinese are now pouring by the thousands into South Manchuria in order to escape the banditry, looting and despoiling to which they are subjected elsewhere.¹

Lamont's observations were accurate, and his judgements fair. As a result of developments in Manchuria like those he described, its population, 18 million at the time of the 1911 Revolution, had ballooned to 30 million by the time the Manchurian Incident broke out 25 years later. I have already mentioned that in 1927, 20 years after the customs authority in Dalian opened, there was evidence of remarkable growth: the trade volume for China proper was 2.64 times the 1907 figure,

¹ Tansill, *op. cit.*, 83.

and that for Manchuria 6.55 times. It was, unquestionably, Japanese military and economic endeavors that brought peace and progress to Manchuria.

What if Japan had known about secret pact between China and Russia?

In order to elucidate the true cause of the Manchurian problem, we must return to the Russo-Japanese War. What led to that conflict was the secret treaty extorted by Russia from China in 1896 as compensation for the Tripartite Intervention. In addition to stating that Russia and China would cooperate if either were to go to war with Japan, the treaty stipulated that a trans-Manchurian railway would be built connecting the Trans-Siberian railway and Vladivostok. The intended use for that railroad, the Chinese Eastern Railway, was transporting Russian troops to the Far East. It did indeed facilitate the Russian invasion of Manchuria, and served as the ideal environment for the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War. Actually, the Japanese did not find out about the secret treaty until 1922, at the Washington Naval Conference (see Chapters 3.1 and 6.2).

If the Japanese had known about the secret treaty at the time of the Russo-Japanese War, Japan could certainly have demanded that China cede all of Manchuria to Japan. And if at that time Japan had gained possession of Manchuria, no Manchurian problem would have arisen. Furthermore, the ¥2 billion debt that Japan incurred during the Russo-Japanese War amounted to a total of ¥6 billion, when one combines principal and interest. At the time of the Manchurian Incident, Japan was still in the process of repaying that debt.

Lytton Report: Manchurian problems “extremely complicated”

The Report of the Commission of Enquiry, commonly known as the Lytton Report, was the product of the League of Nations’ investigation into the Manchurian Incident. The authors of that report were not wholeheartedly sympathetic toward Japan by any stretch of the imagination. Still, they seemed to empathize significantly with Japanese anxiety about communism. The following excerpt aptly describes Japan’s growing concern about the communization of Manchuria:

As the Soviet Government and the Third International had adopted a policy opposed to all imperialist Powers which maintained relations with China on the basis of the existing treaties, it seemed probable that they would support China in the struggle for the recovery of sovereign rights. This development revived all the old anxieties and suspicions of Japan towards her Russian neighbour. This country, with which she had once been at war, had, during the years which followed that war, become a friend and ally. Now this relationship was changed, and the possibility of a danger from across the North-Manchurian border again became a matter of concern to Japan. The likelihood of an alliance between the Communist doctrines in the North and the anti-Japanese propaganda of the Kuomintang in the South made the desire to impose between the two a Manchuria which should be free from both increasingly felt in Japan. Japanese misgivings have been still further increased in the last few years by the predominant influence acquired by the U.S.S.R. in Outer Mongolia and the growth of Communism in China.²

² Commission of Enquiry, *op. cit.*, 36-37.

Additionally, a chapter in the same report entitled “Principles and Conditions of Settlement” acutely pinpoints the crux of the Manchurian problem.

It must be apparent to every reader of the preceding chapters that the issues involved in this conflict are not as simple as they are often represented to be. They are, on the contrary, exceedingly complicated, and only an intimate knowledge of all the facts, as well as of their historical background, should entitle anyone to express a definite opinion upon them. This is not a case in which one country has declared war on another country without previously exhausting the opportunities for conciliation provided in the Covenant of the League of Nations. Neither is it a simple case of the violation of the frontier of one country by the armed forces of a neighbouring country, because in Manchuria there are many features without an exact parallel in other parts of the world.³

This is a masterfully written passage, which fully conveys the complexity of the Manchurian Incident and the depth of its historical background. The incident was decidedly not an event that could be simply defined as an “invasion.” If it had been an invasion, then what should we call Russia’s actions *vis à vis* Outer Mongolia, the three Baltic states, Finland, and so forth? Dispossession? Annexation? Colonization? What about the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan accomplished with the investment of more than 100,000 regular army troops? If these actions, obviously invasions, are not to be called invasions,⁴ then applying that label to the Manchurian Incident is a mindless exercise and an obscene distortion of history.

If we contemplate the fact that the Manchurian Incident arose from the complex relationship between Japan and China, one with no parallel elsewhere in the world, then we should not find it at all difficult to interpret it as a consequence, not a cause or starting point.

Ideals behind Manzhouguo founding expressed in proclamation and national anthem

A proclamation of the establishment of Manzhouguo was issued on March 1 of the first year of the Datong era (1932). It celebrates the ideals upon which Manzhouguo was founded.

1. We believe that statecraft should be founded upon the principle of Tao or the Way, and Tao founded upon Tien or Heaven. The principle on which this new State is based is to follow Tien or Heaven that the people may have peace and security. The government must be approved by the people and no man’s personal views shall be permitted to influence the affairs of the State.

2. There shall be no discrimination with respect to race and caste among those people who now reside within the territory of the new State. Besides the races of the Hans, Manchus, Mongols, Japanese and Koreans, the peoples of other foreign countries may upon application have their rights guaranteed.

³ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴ NHK and other media outlets call them “military interventions.”

3. In internal affairs the new State will reject the policies adopted in the dark days of the past. It will revise laws and enforce local autonomy, draft able men into the service of the government and elevate the officials deserving promotion ... promote and popularize education, respect Li-chiao, the teachings of Confucianism, and apply the principle of Wang-tao, the Way of Benevolent Ruler ... These, we believe will enlighten the people to maintain the honor of perpetuating the peace of the Far East and thus set an example of model government to the world.

4. The foreign policy of the new State shall be to seek and further promote cordial relations with foreign powers by winning their confidence and respect and to observe strictly international conventions. ... Foreign investments by any nation shall be welcomed for the furtherance of trade and the exploitation of natural resources, thus bringing the principles of the Open Door and Equal Opportunity and the like to a fuller realization.

The foregoing articles constitute the fundamental principles under-lying the establishment of the new State. The newly-formed Government hereby pledges upon oath to the thirty million inhabitants that these shall be faithfully carried out.⁵

The authors of this proclamation had clearly reflected on China's evils, notably xenophobia and betrayal, not to mention the many years of tyranny under the two Zhangs. They produced a lofty declaration embodying the ideals underlying the founding of a benevolent government predicated on harmony among the five races. We can sense the sincerity of its messages both by absorbing its words and by reading between the lines. The ideals are sound. The writing is admirable. Critics often indicate that Manzhouguo was not always governed in a manner that reflected its founding ideals. Still, the dismissal — even rejection — by the rest of the world of a new nation, especially one established with such lofty ideals, is truly heartbreaking.

In September 1933 the *London Times* carried an article describing the situation in Manzhouguo two years after its founding. I am bringing some excerpts to readers' attention because it is noteworthy, that the correspondent's critical comments notwithstanding, he also expressed appreciation of the steady progress Manzhouguo was making.

The traveller will be impressed by the rapid progress made within the last year and a half in the field of finance. The currency has been stabilized, and that alone represents an inestimable blessing to a country formerly flooded with the worthless paper of the war-lords.

(...)

The traveller will find foreign opinion favourably disposed towards the Japanese, though justifiably anxious about the future of foreign commercial interests. It is a relief, he will be told, to deal with people who do what they say they are going to do

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[https://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=Government_Organization_Law_\(The_Government_Organic_Law\)_Or_dinance_No._1_of_the_First_Year_of_Tatung_\(1932\)&oldid=13302240](https://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=Government_Organization_Law_(The_Government_Organic_Law)_Or_dinance_No._1_of_the_First_Year_of_Tatung_(1932)&oldid=13302240).

– who are effective. Schemes on which the Chinese have been for thirty years promising an immediate start are now being quickly carried out.

(...)

One must write of Manchukuo as a *fait accompli*; the rights and wrongs of Japan's actions two years ago are no longer relevant to either the present or the future of the Far East. Manchuria is undergoing what may be best described as enlightened exploitation. The best proof that it is enlightened is that the 30,000,000 inhabitants will benefit from the process. They will, of course, not benefit nearly as much as the Japanese; but the Japanese are doing most of the work and may justly claim a lion's share of the profits.⁶

It is fair to conclude that this report is an objective portrayal of the state of things in Manzhouguo. It came at a point somewhat removed from the Manchurian Incident and the founding of the new state, when Manzhouguo was making steady progress toward stability and growth.

The US was welcoming when the Russians overthrew an empire and established a despotic regime; the Americans even called Russia a "democracy." I find it odd and unfortunate that they could not bring themselves to show the same generosity to Manzhouguo which, at least in its early days, certainly had the potential to grow into a model nation for Asia, if not the world.

A nation is a political community that aspires to actualize ethical ideas. One might assume that this definition would have resonated in China, with its tradition of Confucianist thought. But the real politics of China were such that lawlessness was showing no signs of abating. Ideals like the "ethical state" and "benevolent government" seemed to have vanished. By foolishly mistaking communist Russia for a benevolent government, Sun Yat-sen helped pave the way for communist China. However, subsequent history has proven that communism is ultimately red imperialism whose basis is survival of the fittest, a ruthless politics of terror, tyranny, and exploitation. Into such an environment, the emergence of Manzhouguo, which upheld the ideals of benevolent government amid the unceasing chaos of East Asia, should go down in history as a manifestation of human aspiration, even if its reality did not perfectly match the ideals upon which it was founded.

The words of the national anthem of Manzhouguo proudly echo the national ideals stated in the Proclamation of the Establishment of Manzhouguo. I would like to acquaint readers with them, as they reject xenophobia and militancy, instead emphasizing ethnic coexistence and harmony, and benevolent government.

A new Manchuria has appeared.
Crowned by heaven and arising from Earth,
This new Manchuria is our heaven and earth.
Here we shall build our nation,
A nation that knows no suffering, no sorrow,
No hatred — only love.
Thirty million people, thirty million people!

⁶ MANCHUKUO TO-DAY: 1. THE JAPANESE AS CONQUERORS, *The Times* (London, England), 11 September 1933.

Though our number may increase tenfold,
We shall still enjoy freedom.
Cherishing benevolence and justice,
And holding courtesy in high esteem,
Let us elevate ourselves.
Our households are already secure,
Our nation is at peace.
What more could we want?
For the present we shall embrace the world
For the future we shall become one with the flow of heaven and earth.