

The Curse of the Past: Manchukuo and the Han-Manchu Relationship

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Abstract: Historians have conducted extensive research on Japan after World War Two. This study analyzes the Japanese aggression in Manchuria and its rationales in creating a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.” It explores the ways in which the establishment of Manchukuo shape the relations between Han and Manchu Chinese in contemporary China. The analysis is based on multifarious sources, including newspapers in the twentieth century that recorded the history of Manchukuo and findings by authoritative researchers on East Asia. This study sheds light on the status of the Manchu Chinese, who have almost been assimilated into the overwhelming Han majority.

Keywords: Japan, Manchukuo, Manchu, identity, expansion

1. Introduction

Born in 1906, Puyi was the last emperor of China. As the Qing was still reigning over China, his Manchu identity provided an enormous advantage for him that he became the emperor of China. After the collapse of Qing in 1911, however, Puyi was ignored in the chaotic fights between warlords. Situation got worse in the 1930s, when the Japanese invaded Manchuria and degraded both the Manchu and Han Chinese to an inferior status, completely depriving him of the previous honor because of his Manchu identity. He could only work and serve for the exotic Japanese as a puppet monarch of Manchukuo, so unwilling as he was. The situation did not turn better after the end of WWII when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) seized control of China. The Han rulers massively persecuted the Manchu people for political purposes. Puyi had no choice but to hide his Manchu characteristics, living humbly in the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The tragic experience of Puyi provided a case study into the destiny of the Manchu ethnic group by the turn of the twentieth century.

In September 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria and established the “puppet” state of Manchukuo to justify its rule of Northeast China. According to the Japanese wartime propaganda, the goal of establishing a Manchukuo was to help create the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere,” in which a self-sufficient bloc of Asia comprising many East and Southeast Asian nations were led by Japanese to get rid of influence from Western powers. Using Manchukuo as an example, this paper examines the rationales behind Japan’s ambitions in constructing the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.” This study sheds light on the status of the Manchu ethnic group in contemporary China and their relationship with Han Chinese. It enriches our understanding of Japanese imperialism and colonialism in East Asian in the early twentieth century. It puts the adoption of draconian ethnic policy by the CCP government in historical context.

In the early twentieth century, Japan made the attempt to establish the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” in order to face the unfavorable global and domestic challenges, and to exhaust local resources in Manchuria to sustain the Japanese empire. Specifically, the racist treatments Japan encountered during its negotiations with Western powers in international conferences after WWI, along with the economic collapse caused by the Great Depression, and the Kantō Great Earthquake in the 1920s, became significant motivating factors behind its aggressive moves in China and Korea. Moreover, Japan aimed to seize abundant natural resources and use Manchuria as a social laboratory to test political methods of running a Japanese empire. The idealistic claim of building a co-prosperity sphere was just a pretense for Japanese militarists.

The establishment of Manchukuo had a great impact on contemporary Han-Manchu ethnic relationships. Nowadays in the PRC, the Han rulers are deeply concerned that the Manchu’s wishes to revitalize a Manchu empire are influenced by Japan’s claim to return a Manchu nation-state to the descendants of the Qing. Such a claim legitimated the establishment of the “puppet state” of Manchukuo in the 1930s. The concern constituted the rationales for CCP to harass the Manchu people and minimize Manchu influence in contemporary China.

Scholars have explored various aspects of Japanese expansion in Manchuria and the issue of Manchu identity in twentieth-century China. Christopher Goto-Jones demonstrates how Japan’s unsuccessful encounters with the Western powers and the disappointing domestic conditions in the early nineteenth century drove Japan to create the nominally sovereign state of Manchukuo [1]. In contrast, Prasenjit Duara focuses more on Japan’s modernity. In *Sovereignty and Authenticity*, Duara argues that Japan was in great need of stepping forward into modernity and Manchukuo became a sacrifice for attempts Japan made to be fully modernized [2]. Japan’s ambition in Manchuria was partially fulfilled by the existence of multiple ethnic groups in the region. The ethnic communities of Manchu, Chinese, and Koreans all claimed Manchuria as their birthplace. Based on the Manchu’s claim, Japan asserted that it was simply helping the Manchu revitalize their own nation state, the Manchukuo. Duara points out that Sinicization of the Eight Banners of Manchu and the enormous amount of Han Chinese that penetrated into Manchuria in the eighteenth century posed a challenge for the Manchu rulers [3]. Therefore, the Manchu officials of the Qing were forced to make great efforts into reemphasizing the Manchu identity in Manchuria. William T. Rowe adds that the anti-Manchuism among Chinese due to Qing’s awful governance of China in the late Qing period set up foundations for the resurgence of Han Chinese and the inferior status of the Manchu in the twentieth and twenty-first century [4].

2. Establishing a Manchukuo

A great gap existed between what Japanese contended during their expansion in Manchuria and the reality on the ground. Japan claimed that its purpose for the expansion was facilitating the development of Manchuria. In fact, the establishment of Manchukuo mostly served Japan’s interests. Viscount Saito, the prime minister of Japan from 1932 to 1934, once pleaded for Great Powers’ understanding of Japan’s intention. The logic, as Saito articulated, was that “Japan’s assistance was absolutely essential for the development of Manchuria and the maintenance of peace there [5].” In a similar vein, General Minami, who served in the Imperial Japanese Army and Governor-General of Korea between 1936 and 1942, claimed to provide guidance for Manchukuo in that Manchuria needed readjustment for further development [6]. It became clear that Japan considered its behavior in Manchuria philanthropic rather than invasive. This mindset accounted for Japan’s claim of the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.” There was a gap between what Japan claimed in public and its real intentions.

3. Regaining International Honor

Japan's first rationale for founding Manchukuo was to regain international honor. Unequal and racist treatments Japan received during its negotiations with Western powers were humiliating to the Japanese, so they decided to pursue their own path in Asia. After its well-known wholesale modernization in the nineteenth century, Japan defeated two of its neighbors—China and Russia. However, Japan was rather discontented with benefits it reaped from the victories of the two wars. In April 1895, the Triple Intervention by Russia, France, and Germany precluded Japan from occupying the Liaodong peninsula as its treaty with China had stipulated. Also, a lack of mass indemnity from the Russia after the Russo-Japanese war in 1905 stirred up a great surge of dissatisfaction among the Japanese. The Japanese were disappointed that they failed to harvest the same interests Western powers did, though they met all the criteria of a “modern” state. They took this situation as an outcome of racist ideology. As a result, they requested a racial equality act in the Versailles Peace Conference as a victorious nation of WWI, but failed again. According to the Japanese delegates in the Paris Conference, the League of Nations, designed by the Western powers after WWI, “must be founded upon a basis of equality between the nations of the states who are the members of the League [7].” Following this line of reasoning, Japan proposed that a clause eliminating existent racial inequalities and its insertion must be admitted. The response the Japanese received was “impossible,” as said by Wilson, who was ardently fighting Japanese immigration into the United States at that time.

Disappointment veered into desperation. No longer believing in the international system dominated by the European powers, the Japanese decided to establish a new East Asian order determined by itself in the 1920s. In other words, Japan tried to pursue its own path in Asia through achieving regional hegemony and building a Japanese empire. Only through this channel could the Japanese regain their honor destroyed by the Westerners. Manchukuo was a natural outcome of this new East Asian order. Indeed, such encounters with the Western powers became one of the motivating factors of its aggressive moves in Manchuria.

4. Disastrous Domestic Conditions in 1920s

Aside from caving a zone from the European colonies, Japan's gargantuan appetite was due to the disastrous domestic conditions in the 1920s. Diplomatic failures coincided with miserable domestic events in the 1920s. To be more specific, the Kantō Great Earthquake of 1923 destroyed the city of Tokyo, leading to the death and missing of approximately 150,000 Japanese citizens. This natural catastrophe reminded the Japanese of the harsh environment they lived in. As a result, the Japanese public began to make increasing demands for a safer space where they would concern less about potential natural disasters in the future.

In the 1930s, the Great Depression ensued, bringing about an economic collapse. Conglomerates took over private banks that failed on a large scale. As a consequence, wealth was concentrated into fewer hands. The enlarged gap between the rich and poor caused most of the Japanese urban population to struggle in their everyday life [8]. Without new territories, the Japanese could not feel secure enough to develop their own nation. Thus, the catastrophic domestic circumstances in the 1920s drove Japan to turn its attention to Manchuria.

5. Seizing Abundant Natural Resources And Creating A Social Laboratory

The final rationale for the Japanese expansion in Manchuria was to seize abundant natural resources and to create a social laboratory in Manchuria. Manchuria had always been known for its abundant natural resources, such as coal and iron. As a result, Japan eagerly coveted these resources in compensation for the scarcity of domestic ones, which was made clear by the Kanto Earthquake. For instance, Fushun, a city in Manchuria, had a plentiful supply of coal of low prices. Thus, the Japanese

public greatly welcomed the cheap and high-quality Fushun coal. The fact that Manchurian coal was considerably transported to Japan in the 1930s supported the point that Japan largely extracted natural resources in Manchuria [8].

What made the price of Fushun coal so low that it won the Japanese market so successfully? According to The North, scientists of the Imperial Japanese Navy had developed a new method of low temperature carbonization for the extraction of Fushun fuel oil from coal to serve the interest of the South Manchuria Railway Company [9]. The Japanese scientists experimented the novel method for four years in Fushun with the hope of revolutionizing the fuel situation in Japan, by which Manchuria was merely a test field for them. The usage of raw materials in Fushun for the sake of scientific innovation became another method for Japan to make use of the natural environment in Manchuria, which in turn accelerated the process of grabbing natural resources.

More importantly, Japan designed Manchuria as a social laboratory in which it could test novel methods of commanding a country. The yearn for social resources in Manchuria derived from its wish to establish and sustain a colossal Japanese empire. Ernest Boston Price, an American diplomat and professor who had spent over twenty years in China, witnessed Japanese militarism in Manchuria and even once met Puyi, the last emperor of Qing. He confirmed that Manchuria was sure to be “a laboratory in which Japan was registering national change and national evolution [10].” The insight rendered by Price was objective given his position as an American, an outsider of the China-Japan tension. It made clear that Manchuria became a test field for Japan’s modernization process.

What specifically was the “national change and national evolution,” as stated by Price? Though Japan had made impressive achievements during the modernization in the late nineteenth century, a number of above-mentioned problems Japan encountered in the early twentieth century generated an urgent need for stabilization and expansion of the Japanese empire. Hence, Japan carried out an innovative initiative: to help the Manchu establish a state of Manchukuo with nominal sovereignty rather than to colonize the area directly. This attempt totally converted Manchuria to a social laboratory.

6. The Manchu-Han Relationship

The Japanese ruling of Manchuria made the Han Chinese realize the possibility of Manchu to revitalize their own nation-state. The Japanese rationales for the “puppet” state of Manchukuo threaten the rule of the CCP. Thus, the Han rulers strictly prohibit any behavior that could encourage the independence of the Manchu. In this way, the Manchu culture is severely restricted in contemporary China, even at the verge of extinction.

Han Chinese have long considered themselves to be the only “kernel” of the Chinese nation, keeping a skeptical attitude toward other people of other ethnicities that once occupied the territory of the contemporary PRC. Yuning Chen, a professor in Ningxia University, once expressed the central role of Han in *Guangming Daily*, a Chinese national newspaper based in Shanghai [11]. By pointing to the superior natural resources of Han residences and their long-standing civilization, Chen made it clear that Han should be the cohesive core of the Chinese nation.

Consequently, the most ideal scenario for the Han is a thorough state of “ethnic fusion” (*minzu ronghe*), which means that every other ethnic group is assimilated into the Han Chinese and loss their own characteristics. The concept of ethnic fusion is frequently mentioned in Chinese academic discussions. A 1962 excerpt from *Guangming Daily* points out that in socialist China, the process of ethnic fusion is accelerated by more common characteristics between different ethnicities, and the final goal of ethnic fusion is to eliminate regional languages and form a universal language [12]. Therefore, the Chinese government attaches much importance to the enterprise of ethnic fusion with its well-known harsh ethnic policies. As an ethnic group that established a “puppet state” supported by the Japanese, the Manchu are the first to be afflicted by the Han majority.

This situation is not likely to change in the near future. China has incorporated massive content of ethnic fusion into Chinese education and tests. According to the Ministry of Education of PRC, textbooks such as “The Great Chinese Family” should be issued and taught. Relevant content about national unity should occupy at least 15% in the subject of political science. Following the current trend, the marginal, if not inferior, status of the ethnic minorities could only become worse. Scholars and policy makers should pay attention to the preservation of endangered ethnic culture.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the rationales for Japan’s creation of the “the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” included to regain international honor, to transfer domestic problems to the outside world, and to gratify the ambitious demand to sustain a great empire. Due to humiliating diplomatic experiences and domestic disasters in terms of economy and natural environment, the Japanese public felt an urgent need to regain honor. The establishment of the co-prosperity sphere was intended for this purpose. Also, the Japanese attempted to seize abundant natural and social resources in Manchuria to enrich Japan and to seek better methods to run the Japanese empire. Though indirectly, the establishment of Manchukuo led to the adoption of draconian ethnic policies towards the Manchus and the decline of Manchu culture in contemporary China.

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