

"Rejoining Asia": Traveler's Notes from Japan

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Thanks to a fellowship from the city of Yokohama, I was able to spend four months in Japan from last October (1993), conducting research on prewar Japan-China business relations. The following are a few random notes that may be of interest to students in the field of Sino-Japanese relations.

I.

As is well known, over one hundred years ago Fukuzawa Yukichi 福沢諭吉 advanced the famous "Datsu-A ron" 脱亞論 idea, in which he called for Japan to leave the stagnant Asia and join the ranks of the advanced European countries. This clarion call, as some would argue, has led to Japan's "split personality" over the past century, with the result that both acceptance by the modern West and the underdeveloped Asia have remained questionable.

It is not surprising, then, that Japan in the last decade of the 20th century seems again at a crossroads in its search for identity. The emphasis this time, however, appears to be an Asian one. "Leave Europe/America, Join Asia!" (脱歐入亞 / 脱米入亞) championed a recent issue of a major business journal, which was by no means exceptional. A Japanese banker with extensive overseas experience proudly told me that when asked about his nationality, his answer is "I am an Asian!"

The lure of the huge Asian market for an economy in recession is obvious. However, this search is not simply motivated by economic calculations. The overwhelming majority of foreign students in Japan are from Asian countries, with China, Taiwan, and Korea in the lead. Southeast Asia and China are providing many much needed workers at low wages. Also, Asian brides are becoming important for young Japanese men in rural areas. By the same token, enrollments in Asian-language courses are picking up steadily, and the younger generation of Japanese is beginning to learn more about Japan's wartime atrocities in Asia.

To be sure, Japan's re-entry into Asia will by no means be a smooth one. In November 1993, the Asian edition of Newsweek, in both English and Japanese, came out with the cover story: "Japan vs. China: The Great Asian Power Struggle Has Begun." Confident nationalism as a result of economic growth in both countries,

according to the magazine, will lead to renewed tension and possible conflict. Whether or not Newsweek's prediction will come to pass, anyone contemplating the future of East Asia would do well to consult historians.

II.

To pave the way for Japan to "rejoin Asia," Japan must come to grips with its pre-1945 involvement in Asia before it came under American tutelage during the Occupation. Japan's record of colonialism and continental expansion is still a subject of disagreement with its Asian neighbors, although many are taking measures to narrow such perception gaps. History matters! New significance is attached to rediscovering the past, as in the case of Manchukuo, the puppet state from 1932 to 1945. The following three publications are the latest additions to a rapidly growing body of literature on this once-forgotten subject. (See also Gavan McCormick's excellent piece, "Manshūkoku: Reconstructing the Past," East Asian History 2 [1991]).

As in many other fields, the current wave of Japanese research on Manchukuo began in earnest with the founding of a kenkyūkai, this one at Kyoto University. A few months ago, after turning out several research bibliographies, these scholars published a collection of thirteen research papers (Manshūkoku no kenkyū 満州国の研究 ed. Yamamoto Yūzō 山本雄三, Kyoto: Kyoto daigaku jinbun kagaku kenkyūjo, 1993). They deal with the establishment of Manchukuo, its governance, as well as its economy, physical construction, and literary activities there. Future students will certainly find Imura Tetsurō 井村哲郎 detailed introduction to primary and secondary materials in Japan and abroad most helpful.

Yamamuro Shin'ichi 山室信一, a member of this Kyoto study group, recently published a slim but highly valuable book: Kimera: Manshūkoku no shōzō キメラ: 満州国の肖像 [Chimera: A Portrait of Manchukuo] (Tokyo: Chūō kōronsha, 1993). The author compared Manchukuo to the monster in ancient Greek mythology, Chimera, whereby its lion head became the Guandong (Kwantung) Army, its goat torso the tennōsei state, and its dragon tail the Chinese emperor. A prize-winning historian of political thought, Yamamuro is most adept at presenting the multi-faceted and often self-contradictory nature of Manchukuo political philosophy--as a puppet regime and as an idealistic state. The tone is balanced and dispassionate and yet highly engaging, befitting a new generation of scholars free of earlier ideological constraints.

A recent addition in yet another genre is the February 1994

special issue of Marco Polo, a popular Japanese monthly published by Bungei shunjū. "Off we go to the illusory 'Manchuria': Now, down with both the 'Imperial view of history' and the 'Tokyo War Crimes Trial view of history.'" It begins with a simple dialogue on Manchuria, between a young man and an older one, which takes place inside the famed "Asia," once the world's fastest passenger train, operated by the SMR. Next, historian Hata Ikuhiko 秦郁彦 provides answers in a "Simply Q & A about 'Manchukuo.'" Following the magazine's tradition, this issue features several "local beauties" from such cities as Changchun (formerly Xinjing [Shinkyō], Manchukuo's capital), Harbin, and Shenyang. In an unprecedented move, that may surprise serious scholars but certainly is in tune with market trends, it offers two manga renditions of what are taken to be episodes in history. One is entitled "Relics of Resistance against Japan," and the other is "The Youth of Kenkoku [State-building] University 建国大学." The last piece in this issue of Marco Polo brings matters up to date with a description of thriving Japanese companies in Dalian (Dairen), which was under Japanese rule from 1905 to 1945. According to the article, many older Japanese, unable to realize their dreams while living in Manchuria before the end of the war, are finally able to turn them into reality by working there now.

