

# **Japanese Society and the 1931 Invasion of Manchuria**

**JAMES MUTTER**

In order to gain a full understanding of the forces behind the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, one must examine the Japanese social conditions and characteristics that formed the base for military support and produced a public eager for territorial expansion. The Japanese were a people closely united under the Emperor with a lengthy cultural history. They were quick to side with the military's expansionist policy, which was to increase the country's status on a world scale, rather than the government's diplomatic policy, which appeared to uphold only the status quo that saw Japan as a subordinate power.

## **Place in the International Game**

There was an element in Japanese culture that encouraged the ability to, "reflect trends elsewhere". Since the 1868 Meiji Restoration, Japan had been structuring itself in accordance with the systems of the developed western powers. Scholars had been sent to various countries abroad to study different forms of education, government, defense, and political philosophy. The Japanese constitution, military, and new form of government were based on the most successful systems in the West. One characteristic common to all the great powers was that they possessed colonies abroad that they could exploit for economic gain. However, their purpose was not merely for economic gains, but also for prestige and great power status. For Japan to develop, become and remain a great power on an equal plain with the Western powers, it was obvious she also had to attain colonies abroad.

The Japanese viewed themselves as the natural protectors of China and the Asian continent in general. Japan believed that it shared with China not only a common cultural background, but also a common philosophical outlook. The Japanese had long been students

of Chinese ancient texts and shared Confucian and Buddhist beliefs. There was strong Japanese sentiment for cooperation between the two countries, which led to the provision of military advisors to China who played a key role in the modernization of the Chinese military. However, Japan was able to develop at a much more expeditious rate than China and was able to defend itself against foreign imperialism. Once China's weakness and inability to repel its invaders became evident, the Japanese began to despise the Chinese, and viewed them as an incapable and inferior race. China was obviously not strong enough to defend itself against other aggressor nations, so Japan took on the responsibility, justifying itself as the defender of China and the Asian race.

The Russo-Japanese war was a result of this policy. When Russia began its territorial expansion across Manchuria, threatening to invade Japan's protectorate of Korea, Japan took to the offensive, and chased Russia back across Manchuria. The victory resulted in the acquisition of the Kwantung territory and the Southern Manchurian Railway that was an extremely important tool to economical development in the area. If China was going to be carved up amongst the great powers, Japan figured that, being its neighbour and having protected China against Russia, it had a right to share in the spoils. Russia, and later the USSR, remained a threat to Japan, not only because of its interest in northern China, but also due to the concern of a direct attack on Japan.

The USSR also represented Communism. Communism was feared by all western powers, and Japan was no different. It was viewed as a menace to traditional Japanese values and obviously to its capitalistic system that had flourished in the previous few decades. The chance of communist ideas infiltrating popular opinion in Japan was a great concern, but the spread of communism to northern China would be almost as dangerous. Thus, Japan's interests in Manchuria were not merely economic, but also strategic. If Japan were not to occupy Manchuria, it was quite clear that the USSR would, from where it would be easy to launch an attack on Korea or Japan.

During WWI, Japan's expansionist policy became more prominent, resulting in Japan's 21 demands on China. If the demands had been accepted, China would have effectively been placed under Japanese rule. The world powers at the time prevented the 21

demands from being enforced, but the fact that Japan had issued the demands alienated the Chinese, producing outrage and vast distrust for the Japanese. Anti-Japanese sentiment rapidly developed amongst the Chinese. These feelings were voiced through protest, uprisings against Japanese settlements, a widespread boycott on Japanese goods, and occasional acts of violence towards Japanese stationed in Chinese territory. China was one of Japan's largest export markets in the world, and the affective boycotts and uprisings caused great concerns in Japan.

### **Economic and Social Conditions**

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Japan began to face the same classical capitalist problem that the great Western powers had faced earlier following their industrial revolutions. Japan increasingly looked upon Britain as a model for success, as both countries shared quite similar geographical characteristics. Both were small island countries with an inadequate supply of local natural resources necessary for industrial production, both produced far more than could be consumed domestically, and both had an enormous population condensed into a small area. Britain had been able to find a solution to these problems through colonialism and emigration abroad.

In an attempt to mimic Britain's solution, Japan began to search for colonies close to home. Through victories in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars, Japan was able to gain numerous colonial possessions including Korea, Taiwan, Okinawa, and various territories within China.

Japan's large population of approximately 70 million was concentrated in only 30 percent of the island's small landmass. Emigration was an obvious necessity; however, Asian immigration to the United States was prohibited by the Immigration Act in 1924 after a series of racial uprisings occurred on the west coast of the United States. This event outraged the Japanese public who performed mass protests. Some historians argue that this one incident triggered a sudden proliferation of right-wing militaristic societies, whose voices became stronger and stronger in the years that followed.

Other western countries also limited Japanese immigration and put restrictive tariffs on many Japanese goods. The Japanese were therefore forced to set their sights on the next viable option, Asia. The new concessions in Asia thus became an ever-increasing opportunity for not only Japanese immigration, but also for export of her manufactured goods. Manchuria was viewed with “boundless potential” and in particular had the attraction of abundant raw materials such as iron and coal of which Japan was in desperate need. These raw material necessities and potentially exploitable market were a major draw for the Japanese to Manchuria, much the same as Britain had been drawn to her colonial possessions. The acquisition of the Southern Manchurian Railway – the SMR – was extremely valuable in that it led to Japanese development along the railway zone including numerous mines. It also allowed for the Japanese to create and deploy the 15 000 strong Kwantung army, which was to guard the railway zone.

By 1931, the domestic situation in Japan presented a formidable challenge. The stock market crash in the United States and its consequent policy of protective tariffs greatly affected the Japanese economy. The United States was the leading importer of Japanese silk and also represented a large market for Japanese manufactured goods. Unemployment rose drastically, flooding the cities with countless poor and homeless. Farmers, who were dependent on income from silk exports, also faced famine and extreme poverty. By the late 1920s, Japan had returned to the status of debtor nation. Their economic boom was over and imports were greatly exceeding their exports. The economy was obviously faltering and successive political scandals in Tokyo had shaken the confidence of the people in their politicians. Manchuria presented economic prospects for the struggling Japanese. It was an area they were not about to concede to Chinese nationalists or foreign powers. The military had no trouble finding various potential rallying points for their Manchurian policy and later for their rise to political power. They received enormous public support, which was helped in no small part by the Japanese media.

In the 1920s, Japanese newspapers expanded at a rapid rate alongside Japanese literacy. Thus, the media became an important means of influencing public opinion. The four largest newspapers in Japan had a monopoly over media outlets during the '20s and

'30s, with circulation reaching over one million copies. The articles were often critical of government action and diplomacy, attacking their incapability of asserting Japanese influence at conferences between the major powers, despite their proven great-power-status in military victories over China and Russia. The Japanese papers portrayed the Japanese workers and soldiers abroad as heroic men with nothing but good intentions. The boycott of Japanese goods was seen as unjust, and the rare Japanese casualties during the anti-Japanese uprisings in China were given front-page coverage from a very narrow-minded perspective. Public sentiment was easily aroused, and most called for vengeance on the Chinese. In 1931, the media frequently conveyed Manchuria as "Japan's lifeline", and public support for armed "protection of Japanese interests" skyrocketed as Chinese nationalism gained strength and threatened to unite the country. As the fighting in Manchuria began, the Japanese papers supported Japanese military action, reporting that "Japanese soldiers [had] fought gallantly to defend themselves against the unjust aggression of savage Chinese troops". At the same time, the newspapers attacked Japanese foreign minister, Shidehara's attempts at resolving the dispute through diplomacy, dismissing it as "spineless foreign policy".

Japan was continuously embittered as the result of the failed diplomacy with the West. It was evident that the Western powers did not respect Japan as the power that she was, and it became clear to many that this was likely due to racism. The Western nations continually ignored Japan's demands at international conferences and even intervened in Japanese treaties when their own countries were not concerned. Japan as a whole was outraged at the western interference in Japanese affairs, but it was usually the politicians who took the blame. When outrage boiled over following the less than expected outcome at the London Naval Conference in 1930, the Japanese prime minister was the one who paid for it with his life at the hands of a nationalist. The military's hard-line policy for the west gained them large public support following the conference; however, their largest gain was the constitutional situation that arose from the conference, "in which Chief of the Naval General Staff enjoyed direct access to the Throne as the only legitimate advisor on the Emperor's exercise of the Supreme Command". This meant that the navy could now undercut the government, and go directly to the Emperor for discussion and authorization of actions. This

essentially made not only the navy but all contingents of the military able to act independently of the government and allowed them to make their own decisions.

### **Militarism and Nationalism**

Militarism and nationalism were large factors in Japanese foreign and domestic policy, particular from the late 1920s through until the end of the Pacific War. Uniting the population into a nationalistic group was a much easier task to achieve in Japan than in most other countries due to the fact that the country was comprised of an extremely homogenous population rarely found elsewhere in the world. The Japanese people were united behind an Emperor, who was seen as an all knowing descendent from God. Especially in the years following the Meiji Restoration, the image of the Emperor was elevated to a point that every word the Emperor uttered was regarded as an unquestionable truth. The first Japanese constitution was presented to the people in 1889 as a “gracious gift” from the Throne.

Indoctrination at school and at home shaped the public into an extremely loyal and supportive people eager to work hard for the good of the country and the Emperor. Even the national anthem consists of lyrics that praise the Emperor and wish for his eternal rule over Japan. The Emperor was not only considered God, but also the father of Japan. Every Japanese national was a child of the Emperor, and hence a child of God. Since the Japanese saw themselves as a “holy race”, expansion into Asia was not seen as a wrongdoing anyway. Many religiously believed in “Japan’s ‘sacred’ mission to lead Asia and indeed, eventually, the whole world”. The Japanese were taught that they were fighting for selfless ends; that war was not fought to destroy, control or conquer others, but instead was fought for peace. Since every war ends in peace, Japan believed that if they warred with the world, the outcome would be world peace. The Ministry of Education produced a teacher’s guide entitled, “The Essences of the Nation”, which promoted the idea that Japan had a unique role to play in the world as the “mediator and amalgamator of cultures”. Through these ideas, the Japanese were able to justify their advances into China, and the possibility of war. The teacher’s guide linked Japanese culture with their world mission, and any war in which Japan was to be

engaged in was considered to be a uniquely Japanese war that was noble and justified unlike any other country's war. Any military action was not for the sake of Japan, but rather for peace and harmony of the world.

As the Emperor's image was promoted, it became impossible to question the statements and orders from the government or military because they were representative of the Emperor's regime. If one were to object, he/she would likely face a lengthy prison term or death. Michiko Nakahara recalls as a child growing up during the war years questioning why the living conditions in Japan were so poor when the Japanese people lived under rule of the descendant from God. Her parents immediately silenced her, due to the fear that the neighbours might overhear and report her to the authorities. However, her grandmother later took her aside and quietly scolded her for being so ignorant as to believe that the Emperor was truly God.

The military leaders used the economic conditions in Japan as well as the Emperor's name to further their own position and gather political strength. The indoctrination at schools and in military training taught students to work, fight and die for the Emperor. "There was nearly always a nationalization of egotistical aims in terms of a greater good, and this was usually the nation, personified by the Emperor". With this teaching ingrained in everyone's mind, it was very easy to motivate people, especially the soldiers, to do as the military officials ordered. People could be put to death for opposing government orders and also the actions of the military, which supposedly stemmed from the Emperor. This is perhaps the base of the military strength, which later allowed for independent action and eventually the overthrow of the government.

The invasion of Manchuria is directly related to this free-range of power the military exerted through the Emperor's name. After the South Manchurian Railway was bombed on September 18, 1931, in the absence of the commander and chief, Colonel Itagaki Seishiro assumed command and ordered the full mobilization of the Kwantung army and the attack of Manchurian cities and Chinese military barracks. Itagaki did not have the authority to make this decision, but when Consul Morishima attempted to put a halt to the mobilization – citing government orders for diplomatic resolution – his life was threatened by Itagaki for

daring to obstruct the “Supreme Command”. This is but one example of how the military defied government policy to pursue an expansionist agenda, despite strenuous diplomatic efforts to assure the west that Japan would halt its aggression.

It was later uncovered that Itagaki was one of the leaders of the revolutionist society – the Cherry Blossom Society – that sought to overthrow the government and make major reforms to the country. Their initial coup attempts were unsuccessful, but they were linked to the assassination of the prime minister years later. One of the other leaders, the aggressive Lieutenant Colonel Tojo Hideki, later became prime minister in the military cabinet that went to war with the United States, all under the name of the Emperor.

## **Conclusion**

The Japanese invasion of Manchuria was part of the imperialist policy of Japan in 1931. Manchuria was viewed as a source of natural resources for industrial protection in Japan and a pivotal area to be protected from occupation by foreign or unfriendly powers. Japan viewed itself as the “Asian Protector” which was part of its dream of creating and controlling a “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere”. The military was to bring peace and harmony to the area and eventually to the world. Possibly due to the long lack of exposure to other people of the world through insularity, Japan mistakenly believed that the people of Asia would accept their vision of a greater Asia with Japan as its leader. The unexpected anti-Japanese sentiment that arose from their foreign policy, gave Japan a heavy shock. The restrictions on trade, immigration, and political power by the western powers were viewed as racist policies by the Japanese and fueled the rise of nationalism. The military encouraged the nationalistic fervor, successfully gaining approval for its own power and control by undermining the weak political system and aligning itself directly with the Emperor.



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**\*James Mutter** is a third year International Relations and Japanese Double Major, who has travelled extensively throughout Asia and lived in Japan for two years. His future goals include: continuing his studies in Asian-Pacific Relations at the graduate level and working for the Canadian government in the diplomatic field.

**\*\*Note from the Media Editor:** The print version of this paper originally came with endnotes written at the end of piece; however, none of these endnotes were actually incorporated into the written format of the paper, making it difficult to assume where they would have been originally placed. They have been left out as a result.