**The Comprehensive History of South Manchurian Railways Company [満鉄全史]**

by Kiyofumi Kato [加藤 聖文,], Kodansha [講談社], November 2006, 266 pages, 1600 yen, ISBN-10: 4062583747



Review by Fumiko Halloran

The year 2006 was the 100th anniversary of the establishment of “Mantetsu” [満鉄], or “Minami Manshu Tetsudo Kabushiki-kaisha,” [南満州鉄道株式会社], in English the Southern Manchurian Railways Company, a semi-public corporation that was far more than a railway corporation. Born as a by-product of Japan’s victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 to 1905, it had a profound economic and political impact on the region’s development and the outcome of World War II in Asia.

Mr. Kiyofumi Kato, a Ph.D. candidate at Waseda University, specializes in modern Japanese history and is a research fellow at The National Institute for the Humanities [人間文化研究機構]. His book on the Mantetsu is highly readable and backed by solid research into extensive primary sources as well as academic papers and secondary source publications. It includes several maps, many photos, a detailed chronology, a complete list of managers under each president, and organizational charts.

The 40-year history of the Mantetsu fascinates not only Japanese historians but also the general public, partly because of the image that Japanese were building a new semi-autonomous state outside of Japan. More than 1 million Japanese civilians migrated to Manchuria to begin a new life in better economic conditions. They had a western colonial lifestyle, enjoying golf clubs, large parks, and western style housing. The special express trains called “Asia” were among the fastest, best appointed trains in the world. The capital of Manchukuo [満州国], Hsinching [新京 - literally "New Capital"] (now Changchun [长春]), was built with modern urban planning with avenues and streets akin to Paris. In 1937, the Mantetsu owned 15 companies, 32 subsidiary companies, and invested in 33 more companies. They operated transport (rails, shipping, and airline), industry (steel mill, chemical, oil refinery, cement, textile, sugar), commerce (trading, retail), construction, lumber, minerals (coal and gold), electric and gas power, real estate, telecommunication and the press, and hotel chains. By its end, the Mantetsu ran or owned 71 companies with 340,000 employees, including 248,000 Chinese and Russians.

From the beginning, however, the activity of the Mantetsu and the development of Manchuria were riddled with confusing objectives. There was political infighting back in Japan among politicians, the foreign ministry and the military over its control. Relations between the Mantetsu and the Chinese in Manchuria were complicated. The Kanto-gun (Kwantung Army), at first a division of the Japanese Imperial Army, grew into a powerful presence that in the end controlled the Mantetsu.

The Mantetsu’s first president, Shinpei Goto [後藤 新平], was a charismatic leader who was instrumental in modernizing Taiwan that became a Japanese colony in 1895. In Taiwan, Goto served as deputy to Governor Gentaro Kodama [兒玉 源太郎] from 1898 to 1906. Goto was expected to apply similar skills to the Mantetsu that was established in 1906. Goto’s vision of the Mantetsu was modelled after the British East India Company’s rule in India that not only pursued economic interest for the British Empire but was involved in diplomatic manoeuvring and military intelligence.

The author argues that during the turbulent period of domestic political upheaval in Japan and the Hsinhai Revolution of 1911 overthrowing the Ching Dynasty in China, two fundamentally incompatible views about the Mantetsu emerged: The Mantetsu’s leadership believed that by succeeding in business, the Mantetsu could pave the way for peace and prosperity in the region that would be beneficial to Japan. Another view was for the government in Tokyo to take the initiative in diplomacy that would benefit the Mantetsu’s business interests. Gradually, the “national policy first” supporters began to control the Mantetsu.

The book narrates in detail the Mantetsu growth into a large-scale enterprise, its complicated relationship with the Chinese warlord, General Chang Tso-Lin [张作霖], and his assassination by the Kwantung Army [関東軍]. It delves into the rising anti-Japan movement in Manchuria, the Mantets’s participation in the establishment of Manchukuo, and deteriorating Mantetsu operations during World War II. Finally, it assesses Japan’s surrender in 1945 and its aftermath. With Manchukuo and the Japanese military collapsing, Motomiki Yamazaki [山崎元幹], the last president of the Mantetsu, negotiated with the Soviet military that occupied Manchuria in the closing days of the war. He and his senior managers sought to protect more than 1 million Japanese and to obtain their safe return to Japan.

The Soviet army continued to occupy Manchuria after the war during which time they transferred most of the hardware materials from Mantetsu plants to Russia as war bounty. The Nationalist generalissimo, Chiang Kai-shek, was fighting communists and had little control over Manchuria. When Chiang’s forces finally reached the area, they recruited 11,400 Mantetsu employees to run various plants and railways. The Chinese communists recruited 80,000 Mantetsu employees for the same reason in the areas they controlled. The last employees returned to Japan in 1948.

In summary, Kato’s book illustrates the complex history of the Mantetsu from many angles. He particularly focuses on how the concept of “national policy” that was supposed to guide the Mantetsu was the source of trouble. Different civilian and military leaders who had their own agendas interpreted national policy in different ways.

Kato makes the point that the post-war study of the Mantetsu by Japanese had an ideological premise to prove that the Mantetsu was only a tool of Japanese imperialism that inflicted damage on the Chinese. He observes that after the end of the Cold War, however, more studies have been published without those ideological twists. Memoirs and books by those who were in Manchuria or with the Mantetsu tend to be nostalgic and idealizing, and this tendency becomes more intense as they get older.

A perceptive observation by Kato is that for China, the Mantetsu is still a politically sensitive issue. The Mantetsu left behind detailed records of their activities in archives that were transferred from the Soviet military to the Chinese communists. This vast collection is preserved in the Liaoning Provincial Museum [辽宁省博物馆], but it is not open to the public. Kato read a portion of the collection by way of publications by the museum itself, several Chinese universities, and Japanese publishers.

The Northeast region, which Manchuria was also called, was instrumental as a supply base for the Peoples Liberation Army during the civil war and as a heavy industrial zone after the birth of the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) in 1949. Although the Soviets provided economic and technical assistance in the early years after PRC was established, there was no question that the region benefited from the industrial facilities and technical assistance by the Mantetsu employees who remained in China after the war.

For the Chinese, the study of this aspect is problematic. Kato explains that currently, Chinese academic works that show that the Northeast region’s heavy industry was the backbone of the revolution are rejected, particularly in light of the fall during the Cultural Revolution of Lin Piao [林彪] and Liu Shao-chi [刘少奇] whose power base was in that region. In that sense, the history of the Mantetsu still haunts today’s interpretation of that period in China.

Japnese Times

# Memories of 1931 Mukden Incident remain divisive

##### BY JEFF KINGSTON

SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

* SEP 17, 2016

Today marks the 85th anniversary of the 1931 Mukden Incident (also known as the Manchurian Incident), when Japanese troops staged a bombing of their own railway by placing explosives near the train tracks. Even though the explosion did minimal damage and a train managed to pass the damaged section soon thereafter, this “attack” was blamed on the Chinese and used as a pretext to invade and pacify Manchuria. This was the beginning of the Fifteen Year War (1931-45), a Japanese-instigated conflagration that caused widespread regional devastation. China suffered the brunt of that mayhem, which is why this day has become engraved in the collective memory as a trauma inflicted by Japan.

The Manchuria-based Kwantung Army assassinated Manchurian warlord Zhang Zuolin in 1928, but the plotters were not disciplined, thus encouraging extremism. Some of these conspirators subsequently staged the 1931 incident that precipitated wider hostilities, hijacking Japan down a path that lead to the Nanking Massacre in 1937 and Pearl Harbor in 1941.

The League of Nations sent the Lytton Commission to investigate Japan’s seizure of Manchuria. It did not implicate Japan as the aggressor and accepted at face value that Chinese were responsible for the train bombing. However, the commission found that Japan’s subsequent military pacification of the region was not justified and questioned the legitimacy of Manchukuo, the puppet state Japan established in 1932 in Manchuria.

When the League of Nations met to discuss the findings in February 1933, a motion was tabled to condemn Japanese aggression, prompting Foreign Minister Yosuke Matsuoka to storm out. A month later, Japan withdrew from the League, marking the end of its exemplary commitment to working within the international order during the 1920s, one that Matsuoka saw as racist and unwilling to accommodate Japan’s legitimate aspirations.

Matsuoka had a point, but Japan’s aspirations became grandiose and unquenchable. Moreover, the nation brimmed with racist condescension toward fellow Asians and slaughtered millions in the name of liberating them from the yoke of Western colonialism in what was dubbed a holy war, fought on the Emperor’s behalf.

Sept. 18 remains a sensitive day in China. Around this date in 2003, Chinese police detained 400 Japanese tourists engaged in what was characterized as an orgy with 500 prostitutes, arranged by the hotel staff. Apparently the Japanese were unaware that their tawdry escapades were badly timed. Speculation that the orgy was a calculated insult overestimates what these tourists knew about their nation’s history. Overall, in terms of war memory, there is more attention accorded in textbooks to the traumas Japan endured than those it inflicted.

Emperor Akihito has frequently weighed in on this history. In 2015, for example, a year marking the 70th anniversary of Japan’s World War II surrender, he used his New Year’s message to urge Japan’s citizens to learn from history. He specifically referred to the Mukden Incident of 1931 as the start of the war, which was a not-so-veiled swipe at revisionists who have tried to diminish Japan’s responsibility for initiating the hostilities that precipitated an Asian inferno.

The key passage in the Emperor’s message was: “I think it is most important for us to take this opportunity to study and learn from the history of this war, starting with the Manchurian Incident of 1931, as we consider the future direction of our country.”

Akihito was rejecting two revisionist conceits about WWII: that it was a defensive war forced on Japan by Western powers and that it was motivated by the noble goal of pan-Asian liberation. Invoking the Mukden Incident positions Japan as the aggressor in its subjugation of China, highlighting a gambit that led to escalating Japanese aggression in China and to a decision in 1940 to widen the war to Southeast Asia in order to secure the resources needed to vanquish China.

The pan-Asian thesis is appealing to contemporary conservatives because it positions Japan as selfless and sacrificing for the benefit of others. By contrast, the Manchurian thesis makes Japan look like a predator, invading nations to secure resources and markets just like other imperial nations.

The Emperor’s explicit reference to Manchuria was not accidental — he was targeting contemporary revisionists, such as Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who seek to assert an exculpatory and valorous narrative. Akihito’s view represents the long-standing mainstream consensus in Japan (and globally). But revisionists have bristled at this “masochistic” view of history, which they believe inculpates Japan while overlooking Allied war crimes. They argue that this view is an example of victor’s justice, based on the biased judgments of the International Military Tribunal for the Far East (IMTFE) — the Tokyo Trials.

Judicial process at the IMTFE was indeed flawed: it was inconsistent with international law and the guilty verdicts were preordained. But this doesn’t mean that Japan’s military forces, or those deemed Class A war criminals, were innocent of war crimes. Revisionists often cite the dissenting opinion of IMTFE jurist Radhabinod Pal as exonerating Japan from the war crimes charges — but he argued no such thing. He repudiated the IMTFE because it was packed with judges from Allied nations and for prosecuting the accused through retroactive application of laws that did not exist at the time the alleged crimes took place. Pal, however, condemned Japanese war crimes, while lamenting that the Allies were not in the dock alongside them.

Akihito and most Japanese feel that Japan’s exemplary record in the second half of the 20th century brought redemption, and thus this postwar order serves as the basis for national pride. He gives voice to the anxieties of many Japanese about Abe steering Japan rightward, and where that might lead. His remarks carry a great deal of weight because he speaks with unimpeachable moral authority and is widely respected. By highlighting the horrors of war, taking responsibility for instigating the aggression and reaching out to victims and former foes, the Emperor has shown the way forward and restored dignity to Japan and its victims, thus healing the traumas that divide.

Ironically, the political right finds itself in the awkward position of opposing the views of an Emperor in whose name they claim to act.

# The Mukden Incident of 1931and the Stimson Doctrine

**Introduction**

In 1931, a dispute near the Chinese city of Mukden (Shenyang) precipitated events that led to the Japanese conquest of Manchuria. In response, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Stimson issued what would become known as the Stimson Doctrine, stating that the United States would not recognize any agreements between the Japanese and Chinese that limited free commercial intercourse in the region.



*Secretary of State Henry Stimson*

In the 1920s and 1930s, the United States had a number of interests in the Far East. The United States engaged in trade and investment in China. American missionaries representing many denominations worked within the region. The United States also claimed Pacific territories, including the Philippines, Guam, and Hawaii. The United States defended its interests in the region through a three-pronged Far Eastern policy: it included the principle of the Open Door for guaranteeing equal access to commercial opportunities in China, a belief in the importance of maintaining the territorial integrity of China, and a commitment to cooperation with other powers with interests in the region.

**Japanese Invasion of China**

In the 1930s, events transpired that challenged all of these policies. On September 18, 1931, an explosion destroyed a section of railway track near the city of Mukden. The Japanese, who owned the railway, blamed Chinese nationalists for the incident and used the opportunity to retaliate and invade Manchuria. However, others speculated that the bomb may have been planted by mid-level officers in the Japanese Army to provide a pretext for the subsequent military action. Within a few short months, the Japanese Army had overrun the region, having encountered next to no resistance from an untrained Chinese Army, and it went about consolidating its control on the resource-rich area. The Japanese declared the area to be the new autonomous state of Manchukuo, though the new nation was in fact under the control of the local Japanese Army.



*Japanese Soldiers during the Mukden Incident*

The United States and other western powers were at a loss on how to respond to the rapidly developing crisis. Even as the Japanese moved far from the original site of the “attack” at Mukden to bomb the city of Jinzhou (Chinchow), there was little sense that U.S. interests in the area were anywhere near profound enough to make military intervention necessary or desirable. Given the 1930s worldwide depression, there was little support for economic sanctions to punish the Japanese. Instead, the United States sat in on League of Nations council meetings for the first time to try to convince the League to enforce the [Kellogg-Briand Pact](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/kellogg), which both Japan and China had signed. Appeals based on the pact, however, proved ineffective.

**The Stimson Doctrine**

Therefore Secretary Stimson issued the Stimson Doctrine in early 1932. This Doctrine stated that the United States would not recognize any treaty or agreement between Japan and China that violated U.S. rights or agreements to which the United States subscribed.

This doctrine of non-recognition proved incredibly ineffectual in the face of on-going Japanese aggression and expansion. Japan had been expanding its influence in Manchuria for years, and now it formally controlled the territory. Moreover, after its successful conquest of Manchuria, the Japanese attacked the city of Shanghai in 1932. As Shanghai was home to the largest international settlements in China, the sudden invasion threatened foreign concessions as well. Stimson responded to this development by declaring that as a result of Japanese violation of the [Nine Power Treaty](https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/naval-conference), the United States would no longer consider itself bound by the naval limitations agreements. This meant a potential new naval arms race in the Pacific that would inevitably draw in the Japanese, but it did not change the situation in Manchuria.

**Lytton Report**

While the United States sought its own solution, it also sent an unofficial delegate along with the League of Nations group investigating the incident. The resulting report, written by the Lytton Commission, divided blame for the conflict in Manchuria equally between Chinese nationalism and Japanese militarism. Still, the report stated that it would not recognize the new state of Manchukuo on the grounds that its establishment violated the territorial integrity of China, and therefore the Nine-Power Treaty to which many of the prominent league members subscribed. When the Lytton Report was ratified by the League in 1933, the Japanese delegation walked out and never returned to the League Council. The Chinese and Japanese signed a truce, but that agreement left the Japanese firmly in control of Manchuria.

The Manchurian Crisis of 1931–33 demonstrated the futility of the 1920s-era agreements on peace, nonaggression and disarmament in the face of a power determined to march forward. Responses like the Stimson Doctrine of non-recognition similarly had little effect. In the years following the crisis, changing alliances, economic necessities and altered policies would result in an all-out Sino-Japanese War.