



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Agony of Choice: Matsuoka Yosuke and the Rise and Fall of  
the Japanese Empire, 1880-1946 (review)

Frederick R. Dickinson

The Journal of Japanese Studies, Volume 30, Number 1, Winter 2004, pp.  
167-171 (Review)

Published by Society for Japanese Studies

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jjs.2004.0003>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/55092>

*Agony of Choice: Matsuoka Yōsuke and the Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1880–1946.* By David J. Lu. Lexington Books, Lanham, Md., 2002. xvii, 309 pages. \$75.00.

Reviewed by

FREDERICK R. DICKINSON  
University of Pennsylvania

History, Sir Walter Scott once noted, is peopled by living beings—“not abstractions . . . not diagrams and theorems; but men in buff coats and breeches, with color in their cheeks, with passions in their stomach and the idioms, features and vitalities of very men.” In this era of moral and analytic “complexity” and preference for the experience of a hitherto voiceless multitude, historians can rarely admit to an interest in “men in buff coats and breeches.” American Japan specialists have produced few biographies of Great Men in recent years.

David Lu’s study follows the pattern of the most notable exceptions. Like Louis Perez, Herbert Bix, and Donald Keene,<sup>1</sup> Lu belongs to an earlier generation of scholars who intuitively grasp the power of narrative history and the import of the lives of Great Men. Significantly, *Agony of Choice* was originally published (in Japanese) in 1981.<sup>2</sup>

This modified English-language version of Lu’s classic study marks a boon for the study of modern Japanese political/diplomatic history in English-speaking academe. Not only does Lu expose the color in Japanese statesman Matsuoka Yōsuke’s cheeks, he does so from a stockpile of original primary source evidence and with an economy of style that propels the reader briskly through the volume’s 274 pages.

That Japanese scholars continue to cite Lu’s original biography of 1981 testifies to its formidable empirical accomplishments. Like many of the early post-1945 studies of Japanese political/diplomatic history, *Matsuoka Yōsuke to sono jidai* and its English-language reincarnation make liberal use of interviews (conducted in the 1960s) with many of the principals of 1930s Japanese politics/diplomacy. It is a formidable list, counting over 80 names and including chief private secretary to the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, Kido Kōichi; Japanese ambassador to Germany, General Ōshima Hiroshi; vice minister of commerce and industry in the Manchukuo government, Kishi Nobusuke; and Matsuoka protege and future Japanese prime minister,

1. The authors of *Japan Comes of Age: Mutsu Munemitsu and the Revision of the Unequal Treaties* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999), *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), and *Emperor of Japan: Meiji and His World, 1868–1912* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), respectively.

2. Hasegawa Shin’ichi, trans., *Matsuoka Yōsuke to sono jidai* (Tokyo: TBS Buritanika, 1981).

Satō Eisaku. In addition, Lu enjoyed privileged access to Matsuoka's own private papers, granted him by Matsuoka's surviving family. Finally, the author made extensive use both of official American and international archives (U.S. National Archives, Library of Congress, Public Record Office, London, and the Archive of the League of Nations, Geneva), various American university libraries, and, in Japan, of defense-related materials in the Bōeichō Senshishitsu and the bountiful collection of private papers in the Kensei Shiryōshitsu of the National Diet Library. Few American specialists of Japan draw upon these latter two resources today. The result is a study rich in captivating detail and engaged in the most portentous questions of twentieth-century Japan.

Matsuoka Yōsuke realized his life-long ambition of becoming foreign minister only at age 50 (compare with two Foreign Ministry legends, Komura Jūtarō and Katō Takaaki, at ages 46 and 40, respectively). And his tenure lasted only 12 months (July 1940-July 1941). But, as Lu notes, he was the best-known Japanese outside Japan between 1933 and 1941. Matsuoka met personally with most of the great leaders of the day (Franklin Roosevelt, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Benito Mussolini, Pope Pius XII, and Chiang Kaishek). As foreign minister, he crafted two of the most pivotal foreign policy initiatives of Imperial Japan, the Tripartite Pact (concluded with Germany and Italy in September 1940) and the Neutrality Pact (signed with the Soviet Union in April 1941). He also boasts an unconventional personal history. Between the ages of 13 and 22 (1893–1902), Matsuoka lived in the United States, attending grammar school in Portland, Oregon, high school in Oakland, California, and graduating from the University of Oregon School of Law in 1900.

At a time when younger historians (including myself) increasingly stress the intimate association between domestic politics, society, and foreign policy, it is sobering to note the superb blend of personality, politics, and foreign policy already fashioned by scholars of an earlier generation. Lu's Matsuoka is an explosive man with unbridled ambition but a giant heart. Known by his childhood friends as "quarrelsome Matsuoka," he shocked the world in December 1932 when, as Japan's representative to the League of Nations, he proclaimed, "Japan stands ready to be crucified (for the Manchurian Incident)" (p. 85). Stanley Hornbeck warned his colleagues at the U.S. Department of State that Matsuoka had been "addicted throughout his business career to table pounding and practices of intimidation" (p. 221). And yet, as a teenager in Portland, Matsuoka had fashioned bouquets of wild blackberries and ferns for his host mother. On his first daughter's wedding day in January 1940, Matsuoka shed "big tears" in the foyer of his home, mumbling "what a propitious day, what a wonderful day" (p. 273).

Politically, despite the backing of leading statesmen (Mitsui Bussan Shanghai branch manager, Yamamoto Jōtarō; Japanese plenipotentiary to

the Paris Peace Conference and subsequent Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, Makino Nobuaki; first president of the South Manchuria Railway and subsequent Foreign Minister, Gotō Shinpei; and Seiyūkai president, General Tanaka Giichi), Matsuoka migrated from one assignment to another and remained a political outsider. His career with the Foreign Service (1904–20) came to an abrupt end when he quit in disgust over the Foreign Ministry bureaucracy. His term as director in the South Manchuria Railway (SMR) negotiating railway deals with Chinese warlord Zhang Zuolin (1921–26) faltered when the political climate for such deals changed with the Kenseikai administration in Tokyo.

Matsuoka served as SMR vice president under the Seiyukai cabinet of Tanaka Giichi (1927–29). But Tanaka's death forced him to seek another avenue of support; in February 1930, he was elected to the House of Representatives as a Seiyūkai representative from the second district of Yamaguchi Prefecture. In 1932, he became the Saitō cabinet's envoy to the League of Nations. His flamboyant departure from the league in February 1933 delighted the Japanese public but invited the scorn of the nation's intelligentsia.

To tap into the power of the masses, Matsuoka resigned from the Diet in December 1933 and formed a youth corps as part of a movement to dissolve all political parties. When the corps failed to catapult him to the premiership, Yamamoto Jōtarō offered a lifeline in the presidency of the SMR (1935). But the transfer of all assets, including employees, to the newly established Manchukuo government in December 1936 severely compromised the independence of the railway company. Matsuoka resigned the presidency in February 1939 to wallow in political limbo for over a year.

Matsuoka's fortunes were resurrected when his old acquaintance from the Paris Peace Conference, Konoe Fumimaro, tapped him for the foreign minister's portfolio in July 1940. But his term ended as abruptly as it began, with the cabinet resigning en masse (July 1941) in an express effort to purge the foreign minister and his recalcitrant policies *vis-à-vis* the United States. Matsuoka ended his career in Sugamo prison and died in June 1946 while awaiting a verdict from the International Military Tribunal for the Far East.

Although Matsuoka was a political failure, his foreign policies, according to Lu, met with some success. In the critical arena of China policy, he was a "pragmatist" and "moderate." Although an energetic promoter of Chinese development for the economic benefit of Japan ("tairiku keiei"), he remained faithful to the principle of "nonintervention." As adviser to Tanaka Giichi in 1927, he urged the Seiyūkai president to proclaim a strict policy of nonintervention in China and to establish friendly relations with Chinese Nationalist leader Chiang Kaishek. When in April 1928 Chiang's Northern Expedition approached Jinan, Matsuoka advised Tanaka not to dispatch Japanese troops. As foreign minister, Matsuoka pushed for a withdrawal of Japanese forces from China.

Lu considers Matsuoka's posture *vis-à-vis* the United States a failure. His attempt to confront Washington from a position of strength, that is, by aligning with Germany, Italy, and ultimately the Soviet Union, had the opposite of the intended effect. Rather than forcing the United States to mediate a settlement in China, it increased American mistrust and resolve. Nor did Matsuoka's bombastic public utterances endear him to many American policymakers. U.S. ambassador to Japan Joseph Grew noted that, although Matsuoka professed to be "for us," his actions and public statements were "against us" (p. 218). Although he had spent his formative years in the United States, the future foreign minister remained too attached to the frontier life of lumberjacks and railway workers with which he had grown up in the 1890s. His style of confrontation at High Noon was not well suited for delicate negotiations with Washington in the twentieth century.

Mirroring the efforts of earlier Japanese scholarship on Matsuoka,<sup>3</sup> Lu's portrayal attempts overall to remedy the lack of nuance in the bitterly critical "tennosei" scholarship that dominated analyses of Japanese imperialism through the 1970s. Rather than consider Matsuoka a stooge of the military, Lu stresses his complexity and even suggests a dramatically different outcome for Japanese history, and Matsuoka's reputation, had the foreign minister successfully persuaded the cabinet to attack the Soviet Union following Hitler's sudden drive east in June 1940. In that event, Matsuoka would have retained his portfolio and might have arranged a *modus vivendi* with the United States over China.

Lu's study follows a current orthodoxy in Japan that views Matsuoka not as right-wing zealot but tragic hero, a sincere man with a workable vision for China, who, because of his own volatile personality and political weakness, could never shepherd his vision to completion.<sup>4</sup> As with all good biographies, the perception of the man reflects a judgment of the era. The political and diplomatic "maelstrom" in which Matsuoka lived forced upon him many compromises and marked the "agony of choice" that was "ever-present throughout his life" (p. xii). Likewise, Lu's Japan is one that plunges into war not as the product of the clear intent of certain individuals, but by force of circumstance.

This reviewer is neither convinced by the image of a benign but distracted Matsuoka nor of a nation descending blindly into war through unforeseeable circumstances. Despite his volatile personality and varied resume, Matsuoka's trajectory appears remarkably consistent. As Lu himself notes, Matsuoka early on contested Foreign Minister Shidehara Kijūrō's

3. Miwa Kimitada, *Matsuoka Yōsuke, sono ningen to gaikō* (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1971); Toyoda Minoru, *Matsuoka Yōsuke, higeki no gaikokan*, 2 vols. (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1979).

4. For the latest expression of this, see Miwa Kimitada and Tobe Ryoichi, eds., *Nihon no kiro to Matsuoka gaikō* (Tokyo: Nansōsha, 1994).

principle of “nonintervention” in China. He may have advised Tanaka Gi-ichi to proclaim “nonintervention.” But he urged, at the same time, preparation for occupation of the mainland, “if conditions are created that call for a dispatch of troops” (p. 55). Indeed, following the Manchurian Incident, he eagerly attempted to capitalize on the Japanese army’s advance into north China with plans to build a trunk line across China through Mongolia to the Tianshan mountains. That Matsuoka considered himself a disciple of Gotō Shinpei speaks volumes, particularly for what we know of Gotō’s pan-Asianist doctrines and his early attempts to redirect Japanese foreign policy from Britain toward Russia and Germany.<sup>5</sup> Politically, Matsuoka genuinely admired Benito Mussolini, as exemplified both by his fascist youth corps and his excitement over Konoe Fumimaro’s own attempt to replace all political associations with one national unity party. For this reviewer, Matsuoka still represents not the “moderate” faction sincerely seeking a workable solution in a troubled age but Japan’s belligerent, antidemocratic forces whose strenuous efforts to derail the new national trajectory of democracy and internationalism ultimately invited the destruction of Imperial Japan.

*Agony of Choice* may not convince everyone of the valiant struggle of Matsuoka Yōsuke. But as a richly textured study of a pivotal figure who may, in more ways than one, be considered representative of his age, it belongs in the library of all serious students of modern Japanese history and diplomacy. As a product of the best of “old school” sensibilities and training, it is a real gem and should be required reading for graduate and undergraduate seminars on modern Japanese history, historiography, and diplomacy.

*The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895: Perceptions, Power, and Primacy.*

By S. C. M. Paine. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003. xi, 412 pages. \$55.00.

*Reviewed by*

LOUIS G. PEREZ

Illinois State University

This is a very welcome book that promises to become the standard work on a strangely neglected topic in English. It is a tour de force, employing primary sources in an abundance of languages (English, Japanese, Chinese, Russian, German, and French). It is meticulous, well reasoned, and convincingly argued. It suffers only a bit of hyperbole, a smattering of clunky

5. For these attempts, see Frederick R. Dickinson, “Japan Debates the Anglo-Japanese Alliance: The Second Revision of 1911,” in Philips O’Brien, ed., *The Anglo-Japanese Alliance: A Reconsideration* (London: Routledge, 2004).