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The Manchurian Crisis and Japanese Society, 1931-33 (review)

Yoshihisa Tak Matsusaka

The Journal of Japanese Studies, Volume 30, Number 1, Winter 2004,
pp. 178-182 (Review)

Published by Society for Japanese Studies

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jjs.2004.0025>



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period. Among them was a surprising degree of sympathy at the time of the Manchurian Incident for a Japan confronting Chinese instability and insult. The Japanese American press, many missionaries (including Gulick), and some State Department desks withheld judgment until the Shanghai Incident, which created more anxiety in America than earlier Japanese moves in Mukden. The book traces the gradual shift in U.S. public attitudes toward Japan in the volatile later 1930s, attitudes that in the end doomed the quota movement. At the same time, the Japanese Foreign Ministry shifted from mollification to stridency regarding the 1924 act.

In this work, the transition from dissertation to book is not complete. Seemingly endless citations of opinion sources—frequently repeating similar views—tire the average reader. More aggressive editing by the publisher could have given us more polished prose. The treatment of the subject at hand is narrow in that it does not move beyond a particular mode of diplomatic history. It does not transcend the assumption that governmental policy is a consequence of the effective marshalling of public opinion. The study lacks serious theoretical inquiry into the nature of American racism, nor is it explicitly informed by studies of that nature. In the end, it fails to apply its impressive empirical findings in the refinement of understanding of the racist mentality that underlay the debate on quotas. But in the present age of American unilateralism, Hirobe's account serves as a warning of the wages of arrogance.

The Manchurian Crisis and Japanese Society, 1931–33. By Sandra Wilson. Routledge, London, 2002. xii, 252 pages. \$95.00.

Reviewed by

Y. TAK MATSUSAKA
Wellesley College

The Manchurian Incident (1931–33) is widely regarded as one of the great turning points in the history of modern Japan, constituting the first decisive step on a path that would lead to all-out war with China and the gradual militarization of all aspects of national life. Sandra Wilson's study of the response of Japanese state and society to the conquest of Manchuria raises significant questions about the historical meaning of the event. She argues that the Manchurian Incident had a more limited impact on the thinking of the Japanese public than often implied in past studies of the early 1930s and that the people of the time responded with a broader diversity of views than commonly believed. She acknowledges that "momentous changes were occurring in the early 1930s," but she questions the notion that contemporary con-

sciousness reflected an awareness of those changes (p. 4). In fact, most Japanese, she points out, saw their world returning to normal by 1933 as the fighting in Manchuria came to a close. The majority of people at the time, she believes, regarded the Manchurian Incident as a "discrete episode" with a beginning in 1931 and an end in 1933, and she contends that the notion of a continuous "fifteen-year war" stretching from 1931 to 1945 distorts our understanding of the actual experience of this period (p. 217).

Wilson's book is a compact study structured in three parts. The first reviews the core events of the Manchurian Incident and lays out the "public face" of the crisis as produced by state agencies and mass media. The second explores the perspectives of national-level actors, including government officials, public intellectuals, and political activists on the left and right. The third and perhaps most informative part delves into the responses to the Manchurian Incident of rural communities, urban workers, various sectors of the business world, and women in both city and country. Through the course of her study, the author pursues a variety of arguments particular to each segment of state and society examined, but the overall analytical framework of the book is built around two major themes.

First, she underscores the transitory, albeit intense, nature of the war fever generated within Japanese society by the fighting in Manchuria. In the minds of most Japanese, the signing of a formal cease-fire between Japanese and Chinese forces in May 1933, coupled with the lack of any serious international repercussions stemming from either the conquest of the territory or Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations earlier that year, marked an end to the crisis and a return to relative normalcy. The media frenzy that had contributed to a climate of war fever abated, and the majority of the nation's citizens turned their attention to concerns other than Manchuria. There was little sense in the country as a whole that anything had fundamentally changed as a result of the Manchurian war. The army, which had ridden high on a tide of popularity during 1931–33, found itself subject to criticism once again, as excessive military spending came under attack in the 1933–34 session of the Diet. Despite Japan's departure from the League of Nations, foreign ministry officials and modern, Western-oriented public intellectuals remained optimistic about maintaining a framework of cooperative diplomacy with Britain and the United States. They saw no basic change in the country's international standing as a result of the recent conflict.

Second, Wilson argues that, even during the height of war fever, there remained considerable ambivalence and, in some cases, indifference toward events in Manchuria among some sectors of Japanese society. She underscores the need for caution in interpreting the discourse generated by the mass media as a reliable indicator of actual public sentiment, since what appeared in newspapers, magazines, and broadcasts represented "messages that were disseminated, not messages that were received" (p. 69). Wilson

points out that manifestations of public support were not always what they seemed. Donations made in the name of a particular group or community were sometimes the gifts of a few, well-to-do donors, and campaigns to raise funds to support the war effort were not without coercive aspects. Within the government itself, she draws attention to officials in the home ministry, whose attitudes toward the Manchurian venture were noticeably cool. Not only did they show little interest in using their resources to mobilize public support, but at a time when much attention was focused on sending settlers to Manchuria, they continued to promote Brazil as the optimum destination for Japanese agricultural migrants. The author's analysis of the attitudes of the rural community is particularly important. Contrary to what might be expected in light of arguments that posit an intimate bond between the army and rural Japan, village society responded with a wide range of views, including outright opposition to the conquest. The idea of settling Manchuria, moreover, failed to capture the rural imagination and remained only one of many possible solutions to the economic hardships besetting farm communities during this period. The crisis at home, rather than events unfolding in far-off Northeast China, Wilson contends, dominated the concerns of most rural Japanese.

This book draws attention to a number of issues essential to understanding the 1930s. Professional historians are certainly aware of the need to avoid conflating retrospective analysis with the contemporaneous consciousness of participants in historical events. Paul Cohen delves into this problem in *History in Three Keys*, in which he distinguishes between historical event, experience, and myth.¹ Conflation, however, is not always easy to avoid in practice, particularly in the historiography of the 1930s. The catastrophe of the Greater East Asian and Pacific wars casts such deep shadows back into the preceding decade that it is sometimes difficult to imagine much brightness in that era. Urging us to shift keys, Wilson argues that the Japanese people at the time of the Manchurian Incident did not see it as an event that permanently changed their lives, or as the beginning of a radical new direction for the country. The book thus offers an important caveat to those studying this decade: to overstate the strength and persistence of Manchurian war consciousness and to use that mindset too readily as an explanatory tool in the analysis of state and society during this era would be a mistake. In this context, Wilson explores the cultural construction of the catch phrase "time of crisis" (*hijōji*) which, along with many other acquired meanings, came to be incorporated into the humor and advertising strategies of this period. She highlights the importance of the depression in shaping the social and political climate of these years in conjunction with events in

1. Paul Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

Manchuria. Indeed, the fact that the depression began to ease in 1933 just as the Manchurian conflict came to a close reinforces, in her view, the sense of a limited and contained crisis in the early part of this decade.

At the same time, Wilson's characterization of the Manchurian Incident as a discrete episode in the subjective consciousness of the Japanese people does not challenge, at least to the extent that she contends, past studies that have seen the Manchurian Incident as the starting point of a wider conflict. Most arguments that draw causal connections between the events of 1931–33 and the war that erupted in 1937 are based on the observations of historians in their capacity as specialists in hindsight analysis. Wilson herself acknowledges that “momentous changes” were brought about by the Manchurian Incident. She affirms that “the Japanese conquest of Manchukuo is certainly linked to later full-scale war through the series of military attempts to increase Japan's control in North China from mid-1935 onwards” (p. 220). She also sees Japanese military authorities shifting their strategic plans in response to “international tensions surrounding the creation of Manchukuo” (p. 226). In these respects her views appear consistent with the basic thrust of the prevailing case for continuity as seen in historical hindsight. Although they might be faulted for neglecting popular consciousness, few English-language studies have explicitly claimed that the Japanese people of the time recognized the full import of the Manchurian Incident let alone that they were facing a protracted war with no end in sight.

It would seem, then, that Wilson and some of the scholars she takes to task in this book are actually writing history in different “keys.” Ienaga Saburō's *The Pacific War, 1931–1945* might fall under the sweep of her critique, but Ienaga's primary concern lies in urging the Japanese people to assume greater responsibility for the war, and it is in this context that his observations about popular attitudes must be understood.² By focusing on Ienaga, she may also be overstating the currency in English-language historiography of the notion of a seamless “fifteen-year war.” Overall, I believe Wilson has fewer quarrels with the mainstream trends in the analysis of the events of the 1930s than she suggests. The strength of this book lies not so much in contesting an old orthodoxy, but in adding to our knowledge of this era by shedding light on the problem of crisis consciousness.

In terms of subject matter, Wilson's study impinges more directly on Louise Young's *Total Empire* than on earlier writings on the Manchurian Incident.³ Indeed, Wilson's questions about the effect of this event on the Japanese people as a whole appear to be directed, in part, as a challenge to Young's thesis about the enormous impact of the “Manchurian project” on

2. Ienaga Saburō (trans. Frank Baldwin), *The Pacific War, 1931–1945: A Critical Perspective on Japan's Role in World War II* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

3. Louise Young, *Japan's Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

metropolitan Japan. It should be noted, however, that Young's argument does not confine itself to developments between 1931 and 1933. The process of mobilization and cultural construction she describes began in the early 1930s, but in many spheres, such as imperial economic integration and rural mass migration, it did not take off until the middle of the decade, if not later. Young acknowledges the fact that war fever died down after 1933. The larger relevance of wartime story-telling, image-making, and iconography to Young's thesis, however, does not lie primarily in the duration or the immediate reach of war fever. More significant is the role that this cultural production would play in creating a place for the Manchurian Incident, comparable to that occupied by the Russo-Japanese War, in the national narrative. Wilson herself argues, "The longer-term significance of the Manchurian Incident extends beyond military considerations into the very processes by which Japanese people in the 1930s constructed a sense of themselves as a nation and as a society" (p. 223). These would appear to be the same processes that Young incorporates into her rubric of "total empire." Young's view of Manchurian mobilization, moreover, does not posit a monolithic response on the part of the Japanese people. She describes, for example, the ambiguities of such phenomena as the donation campaign.⁴ The diversity of reaction is, in fact, a major part of her argument in which a variety of "marriages of convenience" buttress the structure of total empire.⁵ Wilson's account of the Women's Association for National Defense, where she notes that members of this organization were motivated less by the ideology of empire and national defense than by "the opportunity to find activity and companionship outside the home," offers a good example of this pattern (p. 207).

None of this is to suggest that the two historians are in essential agreement. At a broader level of scholarship on the 1930s, it is clear that Wilson and Young represent significant differences of perspective. In the historiography of the period, there have been two general trends of interpretation dating back to the older debate about "Japanese fascism." One stresses the relative normalcy of the 1930s and, in some cases, significant continuity with the 1920s. The other emphasizes the radical qualities of the decade and sharp discontinuities with the recent past. Wilson would seem to belong in the normalcy camp whereas Young has strong affinities with the radical-break camp. Scholarly interest in Japan in the 1930s is likely to increase in the near future, particularly with the rewards of comparative study in mind. With the breadth of her analysis, spanning state and civil society as well as elite and nonelite worlds, Wilson offers an important voice in furthering the debate in this field.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 158–60.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 418.