



Chang Kai-shek's "Humanitarian Bombs" and the Mirage Known as the "Manchurian-Mongolian Problem": New Japanese-Language Perspectives on the Transnational History of Modern East Asia

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Iechika Ryōko 家近亮子, *Shō Kaiseki no gaikō senryaku to Nitchū sensō* 蒋介石の外交戦略と日中戦争 [Chiang Kai-shek's diplomatic strategies and the Sino-Japanese War]. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2012. ISBN: 978-4-00-025865-4.

Nakami Tatsuo 中見立夫, '*Manmō mondai*' no rekishiteki kōzu 満蒙問題の歴史的構図 [The historical composition of the "Manchurian-Mongolian problem"]. Tokyo: Daigaku Shuppankai, 2013. ISBN: 978-4-86-337131-6.

On May 20, 1938, two American-made Chinese airplanes—Martin B-10 monoplane bombers—took off from Ningbo, Zhejiang province, in the direction of southwestern Japan. Instead of dropping bombs, they released propaganda materials produced by the Nationalist Party (Guomindang), pleading with the industrial workers, farmers, and petty bourgeois citizens of Japan to stop fighting China and resist their militarist government. This “humanitarian bombardment,” masterminded by Chiang Kai-shek, is little known today—perhaps deservedly so, for it had its embarrassing features. For one, the planes never reached the strategically important areas and merely flew over sparsely populated regions of Kumamoto and Miyazaki prefectures. Further, the propaganda materials were either voluntarily turned over to or confiscated by the Japanese authorities almost as soon as they hit the ground. As far as we can tell, the operation had little impact on the Japanese attitude toward China or on the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945).

However, as Iechika Ryōko—a Keiai University professor and specialist in modern Sino-Japanese relations—demonstrates in her impeccably researched and stimulating new book, *Chiang Kai-shek's Diplomatic Strategies and the Sino-Japanese War*, this flight of Chinese bomber planes over southwestern Japan was much more than a quixotic footnote in the history of Chinese resistance campaigns against the Japanese Empire. It was, according to

Iechika, one of the puzzle pieces that fit together in intricate and multilayered patterns to constitute Chiang Kai-shek's grand diplomatic strategy. This strategy was aimed both at persuading the world powers (especially the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union) to render support to the Chinese resistance and at gaining prestige and stature for the Nationalist regime that would eventually (as Chiang staunchly believed) emerge victorious against Japan.

Iechika's study complements recent English-language scholarship that reevaluates, and in some sense rehabilitates, the contribution of the Nationalists to the defeat of the Japanese Empire and the liberation of China, most notably Jay Taylor's 2011 biography of Chiang (*The Generalissimo*). The loosening up of access to archival materials and the easing of surveillance over scholarship in both China and Taiwan—as well as the recent clearance permitting access to Chiang's personal diary, deposited in 2005 at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University—have allowed scholars such as Iechika and Taylor to challenge the Communists' image of Chiang as an inept military commander and an autocratic “coward” devoted to his own survival above any other objective.

Sharing with Taylor a fundamental critique of this Communist characterization of Chiang Kai-shek, Iechika makes use of the Guomindang archival materials (some of which have recently been digitized for online use by Academia Historica), Chiang's diary, and a massive amount of published and unpublished sources collected in Japan to sculpt a complex and intriguing profile of the Generalissimo. Iechika's Chiang emerges as an aggressive and clever—if often arrogant and self-satisfied—strategist, simultaneously pursuing a platter of war plans, diplomatic policies, and long-term projects of nation-building. She argues that Chiang, more than any other wartime Chinese leader, including Mao Zedong, saw the Second Sino-Japanese War as a global conflict fought on several levels of engagement—not just on the ground, among foot soldiers, but also in terms of securing networks for transporting material resources and transmitting information, and even in the realm of domestic and international public discourse (2–8).

In the early chapters, Iechika explores the Generalissimo's ideological beliefs as well as his character preceding the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937, thereby placing his approach to the war with Japan in the context of his larger understanding of modern global history and China's position in it. She points out that Chiang's conception of Japan had not progressed beyond the impressions he had gathered based on personal experience prior to

1927. He distinguished the Japanese people from their militarist leaders and held only the latter accountable for the invasion of China, a perspective that informed the “humanitarian bombardment” (as it was designated by Chiang) described above. Yet he held an exaggerated view of his influence on Japanese public opinion, along with misplaced faith in his Japanese “friends,” such as pan-Asianist Tōyama Mitsuru and party politician Inukai Tsuyoshi.

Iechika suggests that one of Chiang’s strategic objectives in the Sino-Japanese War was to align that conflict more closely with the Second World War: he wanted Japan to become embroiled in a catastrophic total war against the Allied Powers (100–104). Chiang had first hoped that the Soviets and Japanese would be drawn into a full-fledged war, but, subsequent to his abandonment of Nanjing in the final months of 1937, he decisively turned to the United States and Great Britain as allies of China. Following the Nazi recognition of the puppet state of Manchukuo, Chiang distanced himself from Germany and made continual appeals to the Americans, characterizing the Japanese Empire as an “inhuman” violator of international human rights agreements. Initially irritated by what he considered the United States’s isolationist attitude, Chiang, via Hu Shih, the Republic of China’s U.S. ambassador, and businessman-lobbyist T.V. Soong (Song Ziwen, his brother-in-law), made enormous efforts to turn President Franklin Roosevelt against Japan (237–255). The sometimes harried exchange between Chiang and his representatives in Washington, DC, is recounted in great detail, allowing Iechika’s readers to appreciate both Chiang’s desperation and his foresight.

Chiang’s ability as a military strategist receives a balanced evaluation in Iechika’s book. For instance, Iechika contextualizes Chiang’s extensive overhaul of Sichuan’s regional economy and administration in 1935 not only as an expression of his antagonism toward Communists but also as a prefatory step toward a long-term anti-Japanese struggle (76–81). Iechika makes it clear that Chiang, at least as much as the Communists, had a vision of modern nation-building for China that was fully integrated with the process of fighting against the Japanese invaders. Needless to say, her portrayal of the Nationalist leader is not always flattering. Aside from Chiang’s almost self-delusionary belief in his power to shape public opinion in a foreign nation, he was unaware that his own closest aides, including his wife, Song Mei-ling, were blocking him from correctly assessing war situations. For example, when two bombs fell off Chinese planes and landed on Le Grand Monde and the Cathay Hotel in Shanghai, killing approximately 2,400 civilians, or when they blundered into attacking a U.S. battleship, Chiang was not made aware of these mistakes until months later

(117–125). His “scorched-earth” policy and decision to destroy the banks of the Yellow River in order to induce artificial floods are also subject to scathing criticism; hundreds of thousands of farmers lost their lives and millions more were rendered refugees as a result of the latter decision (177–180).¹ One cannot call this type of massive tragedy simply a strategic blunder or a “small sacrifice” needed to claim the ultimate victory; these and other “sacrifices” forced by Chiang on the Chinese people came back to haunt him as they were eventually used by the Communists to portray him as a heartless dictator unconcerned with the lives of ordinary people.

The scope of Iechika’s book does not include Chiang’s postwar defeat by the Communists, although she provides ample wartime data for us to draw our own conclusions as to where the blame for “losing” China might lie. Also relatively underemphasized in her account are the roles played by certain key figures, such as U.S. Army General Joseph Stilwell, in shaping Chiang’s fortunes and ultimate reputation, as well as the question of how Chiang eventually lost to the Communists precisely in the realm of propaganda and ideological campaigns that he was so focused on in the international theater. One must consult Taylor (2009), Mitter (2013), and other works for these details. Nevertheless, Iechika’s study is magisterial yet highly readable—one is almost tempted to say “entertaining,” despite the scale of human tragedies described herein—and adds immense insight and information to our understanding of the Second Sino-Japanese War and modern East Asian history in general.

Intended for a more specialized readership than Iechika’s study, *The Historical Composition of the “Manchurian-Mongolian Problem,”* by Tokyo University of Foreign Studies professor Nakami Tatsuo, examines how Japanese imperialists conceived of and acted on the so-called “Manchurian-Mongolian problem” between the last decade of the Qing Empire and the Mongolian socialist revolution of 1921. Nakami’s astonishing range of research encompasses Japanese-language sources—including memoirs, recollections, diplomatic papers, and memoranda exchanged among military officers—as well as Mongolian- and Russian-language sources found in archives in contemporary Mongolia, China, and Russia. The most surprising feature of Nakami’s conclusion is his complete refutation of the existence of the Japan-sponsored “Mongolian independence movement,” allegedly centered on Mongolian prince Gungshangnorbu (1871–1930) and Qing nobleman Aisin Gioro Shanqi (1866–1922). According to Nakami, Outer Mongolia’s Bogd Khan

regime, established in 1911 and headed by the eighth Jebtsundamba Khutuktu (a high-ranking lama in Tibetan Buddhism), was the outcome of the sole legitimate “Mongolian independence movement.” Any other “Manchurian-Mongolian” political movement allegedly sponsored by the Japanese, at least up to the machinations of the Kwantung Army in 1930s leading to the establishment of the Japanese collaborationist state Mengjiang in 1939, was nothing more than a pipe dream shared by a handful of “continental adventurers” and military officers.

Nakami begins his examination by deconstructing the Japanese conception of “Manchuria-Mongolia” as a regional category, which, based strictly on geopolitical calculations, has always been divorced from the way native Manchus and Mongolians saw their own territories (51–67). He shows that the “Eastern Inner Mongolia” that eventually fused with “Southern Manchuria” to form an object of so much obsession and preoccupation among Japanese policy makers and civilian activists was an entirely artificial “region” literally made up on the map, as it were, through a 1912 agreement with Russia.

Nakami then pieces together the exact relationship between Gungasangnorbu, on the one hand, and Kwashima Naniwa (1866–1949) and other Japanese “Asia hands” congregating in northeastern China, on the other. Based on Mongolian and Chinese sources Nakami argues that, while Gungasangnorbu was a forward-looking leader with a fairly good grasp of the need for modernizing reforms, he suffered from chronic financial problems and had virtually no military power of his own (89–102). Carefully sifting through the Japanese-language sources, Nakami finds little evidence that Japanese diplomats or even high-ranking military officers, such as Utsunomiya Tarō (1861–1922), an army general, and Taga Muneyuki (1872–1935), the Japanese military adviser to Yuan Shih-kai, concretely supported or even sympathized with the wild scheme of Mongolian princes setting up a pro-Japanese “kingdom” of their own against the backdrop of the Xinhai Revolution. Moreover, Gungasangnorbu and other Mongolian princes were approaching Russia to promote their interests, and this “pragmatic” orientation on their part was well known to Japanese diplomats like Consul Baron Ishūin Hikokichi (1864–1924) and Foreign Minister Uchida Kōsai (1865–1936). Despite this skepticism, did the Japanese not offer weapons, bullets, and gunpowder to Gungasangnorbu and lend him money after all? Yes, but these were nothing more than acts of insurance in preparation for any future contingency. The Japanese Empire’s view of the Mongol princes, Nakami argues, was more accurately represented in Baron Ishūin’s scathing

opinion letter:

As far as I can see, Mongolian princes to begin with are a band of riffraff without any ideology or conviction of their own. Once mobilized they all call for a constitutional monarchy, and with one rebuke from Yuan Shih-kai, all hold their breaths.... What [Gungasangnorbu] and his ilk really want is to do whatever is convenient for them in any given moment. It is not difficult to imagine that if any threat or seduction were visited on them from the other side, they would immediately betray us. (144)

Nakami makes sure we comprehend that these Japanese views are just as self-centered as those of the Mongols they derogate. He defends Gungasangnorbu against accusations of being an opportunist by demonstrating that, with such limited resources and lack of solidarity among the Mongol princes, there was little else he could do, other than keeping stronger forces from overwhelming his domain.

In the book's later chapters, Nakami discusses Babujab (alternately spelled Babuzhabu, 1875–1916), a Mongol military commander portrayed either as a patriot, in the national history of Mongolia, or, conversely, as a pro-Japanese traitor, in mainland Chinese historiography. For Nakami, Babujab represents a true Mongolian victim of great power politics, especially the muddled continental policy of the Japanese Empire. Babujab initially supported the Bogd Khan regime but was eventually alienated from the Outer Mongolian tribes and did not want to return to the jurisdiction of Republican China. Unluckily for him, this led him to gravitate toward the Japanese anti-Yuan Shih-kai machinations around the time of the submission of the Twenty-One Demands in 1915. Again, Japanese military and diplomatic corps were uniformly skeptical about the “usefulness” of men like Babujab, and, despite Kawashima Naniwa's rhetorical bluster, the Japanese abandoned the Mongol commander, who was killed by a stray bullet while fighting Chinese troops on his southward advance. After Babujab's death, his soldiers were scattered all over, with some joining the anti-Bolshevik White Russian troops and others eventually surrendering to the Mongolian Revolutionary Army.

Unfortunately, Nakami does not really go into the story of Demchugdongrub (1902–1966), a.k.a. De Wang, another Mongolian prince who was appointed head of the Japanese puppet state of Mengjiang in 1939, except for hinting at a similar gap between Japanese designs and Mongolian reality. Nonetheless, he makes it abundantly clear that the imperialistic designs of “continental adventurers” (*dairiku rōnin*), such as Kawashima

Naniwa in the first three decades of the twentieth century, are almost entirely fictitious constructs, retrospectively reified from the viewpoint of the 1930s. The reality of “Manchuria” and “Mongolia” in the 1910s and 1920s was nothing like what the Japanese pan-Asianists claimed in their propagandistic publications: there was no long-term plan to resolve Japan’s “Manchurian-Mongolian problem” that the Japanese military, Foreign Ministry, and civilian activists could all agree about and work on. Nakami suggests instead that many “continental adventurers” held on to “a variety of sometimes mutually contradictory schemes,” and that the military and diplomats “join[ed] these schemes when it suited them, but when not, mercilessly threw them away” (253). According to Nakami, the one figure—possibly the *only* figure—who actually benefited from all these squabbles, scams, and hugger-mugger among the Japanese was the warlord Zhang Zuo-lin. Nakami concludes that it was not the mirage of the “Manchurian-Mongolian problem” and the frankly fantastic or ludicrous solutions thrown at it by the Japanese imperialists, but the real power commanded by Zhang in southern Manchuria that led to his assassination in 1928 by the Kwantung Army and, subsequently, to the Manchurian Incident.

Although Nakami’s and Iechika’s studies deal with different regions, different topics, and even different eras of history, they are both exemplary works of transnational history as applied to modern East Asia. They strongly challenge limited and prejudiced perspectives of national histories, be they Chinese, Mongolian, or Japanese, drawing on multilingual primary sources from over all over the world, from Dairen to Ulaanbaatar to Stanford, and evince a strong awareness of global scholarly readership. Most importantly, they are truly “transnational” in the sense that they recover the agency of local actors—Chiang Kai-shek, Gungasangnorbu, Babujab—and cast those actors in the context of global relations of material exchange and discursive circulation. From Iechika’s book, for instance, we learn not whether Chiang was a heroic leader, fit to be enshrined in the pantheon of Chinese and Taiwanese national histories, but more precious and useful information about the ways in which he shaped his military and diplomatic strategies in relation to the dynamics of world history. This does not excuse Chiang’s many foibles and failings, but it certainly gives us a more complete portrait of him than one confined to the framework of national history. Her book challenges the perspective of seeing Chiang and other Chinese figures and events in the wartime period only in terms of Chinese history and regards them as a part of a global history of intersecting imperialisms, nationalisms and political movements. Likewise, Nakami’s

exposure of the absence of a Japan-sponsored “Mongolian independence movement” does not lead to the exoneration of Japanese imperialism but, rather, to a more accurate and fully rounded understanding of its extent and limits in relation to the Asian continent. Rather than reading one more treatise espousing the theoretical imperatives of a transnational history, readers are recommended to take up the two books under discussion, which *practice* transnational history with care, precision, and conviction.

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Notes

- 1 Rana Mitter (2013, 164) estimates that there were three to five million refugees.

References

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