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# Gauging the Tide: the Rise of Nationalist China in Japan's Leading Newspapers, 1928-29

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**Abstract** The capture of Beijing by Nationalist forces in June 1928 marked the beginning of a new phase in Sino-Japanese relations, as political developments in China impacted on issues such as treaty revision and Japan's interests in the Northeast. Although negotiations did not bring a solution to those fundamental questions, there was some diplomatic progress that, one year later, led to Tokyo's recognition of the Nanjing government. How did the Japanese press respond to this process? To provide a baseline for broader surveys, this essay compares the stances of the two largest newspapers, considering their assessment of both domestic and foreign factors. The analysis shows that the *Asahi* and the *Mainichi* differed to a significant degree in their respective interpretations of the facts.

**Keywords** Asahi. Mainichi. Nanjing government. Tanaka cabinet. Manchuria. Unequal treaties. Jinan incident. Huanggutun incident.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Early Reactions to the Nationalist Victory. – 3 On Nationalist China. – 4 On Japan's China Policy. – 5 On the Opposition and the Great Powers. – 6 On Manchuria. – 7 Conclusions.

## 1 Introduction

Discourse and narratives in the mass media are an essential aspect of international politics. Yet most research on Sino-Japanese relations in the early years of Nationalist rule – that is, before the Manchurian incident – has treated press sources in a sporadic fashion, focussing instead on official documents. As a result, it is still difficult



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to appreciate the interplay between institutional actors and public opinion in that period. The present essay aims to partly fill this gap through a comparative analysis of all the editorials on China published in Japan's two largest newspapers, the *Ōsaka Asahi shinbun* and *Ōsaka Mainichi shinbun* (hereafter *Asahi* and *Mainichi*), over the span of 13 months, from June 1928 to June 1929. The period examined goes from the conclusion of the Northern Expedition to the fall of the Tanaka Giichi cabinet (in office from 20 April 1927 to 2 July 1929), encompassing a number of events that significantly affected the relations between the two countries [tab. 1]. The range is broad enough to allow us to grasp how writers addressed bilateral issues, as the progress of Chinese reunification under the Nationalist Party was putting more and more pressure on Japanese diplomacy to search for viable solutions.<sup>1</sup>

At that time, Japan had a highly developed newspaper market, which rested on mass literacy and fierce competition between commercial media companies. Policy debates in the press were quite free, as government censorship chiefly targeted those views that called the foundations of state authority into question, such as pro-Communist arguments.<sup>2</sup> Since the Meiji period (1868-1912), newspapers had been playing an important role in the construction of the modern Japanese nation as an 'imagined community'. Public opinion on foreign affairs and national interests, as conveyed through the mainstream media, was a force that policy-makers could not ignore. This is especially true for the 1920s, when the two main political parties ruled alternatively.<sup>3</sup>

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**1** On Japan's China policy under the Tanaka cabinet, see Usui 1971, 61-204; Iriye 1973, 163-253; Usui 1998, 1-17; Hattori 2001, 191-251; Satō 2009; Kitano 2017.

**2** On the expansion of press readership, see Yamamoto 1981; Huffman 1997; Ariyama 2009. For a comprehensive treatment of government-press relations in the imperial era, see Kasza 1988; Sasaki 2013.

**3** On domestic politics in Japan at the time of the Tanaka cabinet, see Murai 2014, 21-88.

**Table 1** Timeline of main events

China's relations with Japan and the other powers		China's domestic situation	
<b>1928</b>			
5.3-11	Jinan incident. Japanese occupation continues until May 1929.		
5.18	Tanaka cabinet's warning to the Northern and Southern governments.	6.4	Huanggutun incident (6.21 Zhang Zuolin's death confirmed officially).
		6.8	The Nationalist Revolutionary Army enters Beijing.
		7.3	Zhang Xueliang takes office as new leader of the Three Eastern Provinces. Negotiations with the Nationalists follow.
7.7	Nanjing government's statement on abrogation of the unequal treaties.		
7.18-8.2	First round of official negotiations with Japan.		
7.19	Nanjing notifies Japan the expiration of the bilateral trade treaty (7.20).		
8.9	UK-China agreement on the Nanjing incident of March 1927.	8.1-15	5th Plenum of the Nationalist Party Central Executive Committee in Nanjing.
7.25	US-China treaty on tariffs.	8.12	Under Japanese pressure, Zhang declares talks with Nanjing suspended.
		10.10	Inauguration of the reorganised Nationalist government in Nanjing, with Chiang Kai-shek as president.
10.19-26	Second round of negotiations with Japan.		
11.3	US officially recognises the Nationalist government.		
12.19	UK-China treaty on tariffs.		
12.20, 22	UK and France officially recognise the Nationalist government.		
12.22	Northeast forces seize from the Soviets the CER telecom HQ in Harbin.	12.29	Zhang raises the Nationalist flag in the Northeast.
<b>1929</b>			
1.25, 3.28	Third round of negotiations with Japan.	1.10	Zhang has his rivals Yang Yuting and Chang Yinhuai executed.
1.19	China-Japan agreement on tariffs (ratified by Japan 1.30).	1.17	Resolution of the demobilisation conference in Nanjing
3.28	China-Japan agreement on the Jinan incident (decided 3.24).	3.15-28	3rd National Congress of the Nationalist Party in Nanjing. Guangxi clique's opposition to the central government escalates into rebellion.
		4.5	Nanjing's army captures Wuhan
5.2	China-Japan agreement on the Nanjing and Hankou incidents of March-April 1927 (laid out 4.14, 4.16).	5.15	Feng Yuxiang joins the rebellion against Chiang Kai-shek, but some of his commanders switch sides.
5.27	Chinese police raids the Soviet consulate in Harbin.	5.27	Feng Yuxiang announces his retirement.
6.3	Japan recognises the Nationalist government (preannounced 5.21).	6.1	Reinterment ceremony for Sun Yat-sen in Nanjing.

The findings presented here complement previous studies on press coverage of the Northern Expedition (Revelant 2017; 2018), the Jinan and Huanggutun incidents (Tamai Kiyoshi kenkyūkai 2015; 2009), and the later Central Plains War (Shimada 2013). They also integrate a selective review of China-related editorials from the *Asahi* (Gotō 1987), extending from 1911 to 1931, and research on individual journalists and columnists (Fujimura 2013, 160-214; Masuda 2017, 99-110; Shimada 2017; 2018), as well as on the liberal economic magazine *Tōyō keizai shinpō* (Eguchi 1973, 355-70). Taken together, these works illustrate the diversity of political views that were circulating in Japan in those years. They also indicate, however, that the army could effectively use its power to grant or deny access to sensitive information, so as to manipulate news and avoid claiming responsibility for its actions.

Specifically, Gotō has noted that the *Asahi* adopted a sympathetic tone towards the Nationalist Party as its armies rolled through Southern China (1987, 249-53), and maintained it consistently through the following years (for the period discussed here, cf. 296-311).<sup>4</sup> Shimada (2013) has found that this approach contrasted with the turn against the Nanjing government that the *Mainichi* took during the civil war of 1930. Revelant (2017) has observed that over the course of 1927-28 the *Tōkyō Asahi shinbun* gradually came to share the stance of its senior partner in Osaka, while the *Mainichi* maintained a chiefly pessimistic view of developments on the continent. This leads to the hypothesis, to be verified here, that – contingent reasons aside – the *Mainichi*'s hostile turn in 1930 may have stemmed from a longer process of critical appraisal, which culminated in a negative view of Chiang Kai-shek's regime. The other two surveys, conducted by teams of students under the supervision of Tamai Kiyoshi, have targeted a broader sample of newspapers and magazines. Although they do provide a wealth of evidence and an assessment of certain trends, their analysis conflates different kinds of articles, from editorial comments to correspondents' reports, interviews and occasional contributions by other writers.

To lay a solid foundation for future surveys, the method adopted here will be to restrict the discussion to editorials, which defined the newspaper's line, as distinct from individual opinions. Hence, these articles were always unsigned.<sup>5</sup> We shall consider only the *Asahi* and

<sup>4</sup> Dates in italics appear further in the text to mark those articles that Gotō has cited in his volume. There was a consonance of views between the *Asahi* and Yoshino Sakuzō (1878-1933), the liberal political scientist and columnist whose thought is the object of the above-cited study by Fujimura.

<sup>5</sup> A notable exception is the Tokyo-based *Kokumin shinbun*, which relied on some well-known authors to attract readers. The staff members forming the board in charge of editorials at the *Asahi* and *Mainichi* were listed annually in Japan's main newspaper yearbook (*Nihon shinbun nenkan* 1921-40. On the period discussed here, see the volume for 1929, part 3: 139, 143). Gotō (1987) has identified the author of most editori-

*Mainichi*, because they can serve as a benchmark for broader press surveys. Standing out from their competitors in Western Japan, they ranked at the top on the overall national market. The two newspapers that ranked immediately below them in terms of circulation were their partners in the respective publishing groups, namely the *Tōkyō Asahi shinbun* and *Tōkyō Nichinichi shinbun*. Compared to Osaka, Japan's capital was home to a larger number of second and third-tier newspapers, resulting in smaller market shares for the big ones.<sup>6</sup> Both *Asahi* and *Mainichi* were commercial enterprises that operated independently from the government and political parties. While scholars usually acknowledge the former as representative of inter-war liberal thought in the urban milieu, research has not yet clarified the character of the latter. Over the course of the period surveyed here, the *Asahi* featured 65 editorials on China, while those in the *Mainichi* numbered 72. Among the latter, 13 were also published in the exact same form in the *Tōkyō Nichinichi* (see Bibliography).

## 2 Early Reactions to the Nationalist Victory

In the *Mainichi*, the conclusion of the Northern Expedition spurred security concerns, which went hand in hand with a rather cold attitude towards the Nationalists (6.1; 6.4; 6.9; 6.12; 6.20; 6.23; 7.10). Concerning both the party and its military forces, the editorialist regretted that “we can't place sufficient trust in them”. He noted that behind slogans such as “smash the unequal treaties” lay an army “filled with a plundering spirit” that would not “gladly respect Japan's legitimate rights”. Therefore, Japan should be temporarily allowed to “protect [those rights] by itself”. The writer approved the warning that the Tanaka cabinet had delivered to the Beijing and Nanjing governments in May to prevent the spread of civil war in Manchuria (6.1). He further urged the cabinet to arrange adequate

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als on China as Kamio Shigeru, who also served as Head of the China desk in the period examined here. Sawamura Yukio, Head of the China desk at the *Mainichi*, was an editorial board member as well.

<sup>6</sup> The most detailed survey concerning the daily circulation of newspapers for the early Shōwa era (1926-45) is provided by a collection of police reports for November 1927 addressed to the Police Affairs Bureau of the Home Ministry (Keiho kyoku 1979). According to this source (7, 28), at the end of the month the *Asahi* issued 1,260,596 copies and the *Mainichi* 1,166,432, while the *Tōkyō Asahi* and *Tōkyō Nichinichi* printed about 400 and 450,000 copies, respectively. Company data (*Asahi shinbun* 1979, tab. “Asahi shinbun sōkan irai no busū no suii [Changes in the Number of Copies of the *Asahi Shinbun* Since Its Founding]”, unnumbered page after 621; *Mainichi shinbun* 2002, vol. *Bekkan*, 97) do not allow a precise comparison, because they refer to different seasons: for the *Asahi*, the figures are 922,900 in 1928 and 966,400 in 1929, as of 20 May; for the *Mainichi*, they are 1,370,291 in 1928 and 1,503,589 in 1929, as of 1 January (typically the day with highest sales).

defences in the Beijing-Tianjin area together with the other powers, as provided for by the treaties (6.4). In his view, one could foresee that the likely formation of a coalition government under Chiang Kai-shek, Feng Yuxiang and Yan Xishan would not lead to “the great goal of peace and unity”, but rather “produce a completely opposite phenomenon” (6.4). In the long run, it was still uncertain whether the alliance between factional leaders in the Nationalist camp would hold (6.9) and pave the way to demobilisation, which was not an easy task anyway (7.10).

Although the Nationalists did not advance beyond the Great Wall, the situation in Manchuria following the assassination of Zhang Zuolin warranted special attention. It was too early to tell whether his son and successor would be able to

protect the territory and bring peace to the people in the Three Eastern provinces, as well as resist the rising power of the South, and entertain amicable relations with Japan and Russia. (6.20)

The editorialist pointed out that the Marshal had “met a tragic fate” because, carried away by his ambition to control the national government, “he had forgotten about the geographical and political relations” between his home region and neighbouring countries (6.20). These remarks suggest that the *Mainichi* favoured the preservation of an autonomous regime in the Northeast. However, once it became clear that Zhang Xueliang was negotiating with the Nationalists, the commentator conceded that a political deal was desirable to avoid the resumption of warfare (7.10). He disapproved of Tanaka’s attempt to forestall a North-South agreement by putting pressure on Zhang, and regarded it as counterproductive. More broadly, he expressed “extreme concern” about the hard-line turn of the cabinet’s China policy, and advised “deep reconsideration” on the matter (7.25).

The *Asahi* held a more positive view of the Nationalists’ successful thrust into the North. Dismissing security concerns, it greeted the capture of Beijing as “a pivotal event in the history of the Chinese Revolution”, and expressed a confident expectation that Southern authorities would lead the construction of an orderly country with the support of foreign powers. The new phase should include a shift “from clash to accord” in Nanjing’s diplomacy (6.9). In the author’s opinion, there were encouraging signs about the factional leaders’ willingness to set aside their rivalries (6.14a; 6.28). Regarding Manchuria, the *Asahi* too opposed attempts to prevent a North-South deal (7.6). Differently from the *Mainichi*, however, it advocated a bold revision of Japan’s continental policy. While the Northern Expedition was still in progress, the newspaper had advised Tokyo to engage the Nationalists and settle the question of Japanese interests in Manchuria with them, rather than Zhang (4.12; 5.20). After Zuolin’s death, the

editorialist recommended that the cabinet “avoid becoming trapped in past karma” (6.14b), and act instead as “a bridge” to facilitate a “new relationship between the South and the Three Eastern provinces” (7.6). To further its own interests, Japan should discard the current defensive posture that ignored the South, and “get closer to the force that has the greatest say over stability” in the Northeast (7.6).

### 3      **On Nationalist China**

If, according to the *Mainichi*, Japan's hardening meant that the military and the Premier's entourage had prevailed over diplomats, the newspaper also put a share of the blame on the Nationalists, who had renewed their demand for the immediate abrogation of the unequal treaties (7.25). The Nationalists' return to a militant posture, after a period of moderation following their breakup with the Communists in 1927, was the object of repeated censure in the newspaper (7.16; 7.19; 7.21; 7.25; 7.27; 8.8; 8.10; 8.18). What they had established in Nanjing was “clearly a xenophobic government, unreasonable and unlawful” (7.16). The editorialist observed that within the party there were “domestic reasons for its return to a childish approach” in foreign policy matters (7.19). In other words, its leaders were currying popular favour through an aggressive foreign policy. With a financial metaphor, the writer hinted at the legacy of Soviet coaching in the party:

The statement by Foreign Minister Wang [Zhengting] concerning the abrogation of the treaties is an attempt to settle in full - at foreign countries' expense - a bill that was issued as a slogan for domestic politics; that's the way they do things in Soviet Russia. (7.27)

The advice to Chinese leaders, then, was to mend their ways and follow the lesson Japan could offer them:

[If] Japan has come to occupy an important position internationally as a first-rank country, that is because, unlike the Chinese people of today, it was driven by ardent patriotism to pursue first the repletion of its national strength by striving for domestic improvements. At the same time, when it comes to other countries, it has respected international justice and customs with prudence and good faith, thus building its path step by step. (8.8)

Regrettably, instead,

China has not given the least sign of self-examination or gratitude; behaving outrageously, it has presented us with a great affront, the Nanjing incident. Moreover, [...] it has displayed an unlawful

attitude in its attempt to encroach on our established rights and interests. On top of that, domestically it is deceiving the people, while spreading false propaganda across the world; it is trying to bring Japan down by deceitful means. (8.18)

Consequently, the *Mainichi* supported Japan's diplomacy in its refusal to acknowledge Nanjing's denunciation of the trade treaty, along with its offer to discuss a revision of it on the basis of the valid text (8.10). The ongoing boycotts of Japanese goods, and other protests in China, were occasionally the main topic of editorials, which examined the problem from various angles (12.11; 12.15; 12.17; 1.16; 4.24; 5.8). In the writer's opinion, the anti-Japanese movement had grown so much at the instigation of the Nationalist Party that it was beyond Nanjing's means to stop it (10.25; 3.26). Indeed, he observed, radical groups (12.15), as well as the Guangxi clique (1.16), were fueling protests to weaken Chiang Kai-shek, who understood the danger posed by uncontrolled xenophobia (12.17). This notwithstanding, the author placed some trust in Nanjing's ability to at least restrain the boycotts (4.24). He went as far as to demand effective action in that direction as a precondition for negotiating a treaty revision (6.25).

Comments on bilateral negotiations should be read in conjunction with those on the ability of the Nationalist Party and government to overcome factional strife (8.26; 10.5; 10.10; 12.27; 1.5; 1.16; 3.8; 3.16; 3.21; 3.23; 4.9; 5.19; 5.26; 6.22). Until the latter part of the period under investigation, the *Mainichi* lamented that "there seems to be little reason for optimism", as "there is in them no fixed view, either in terms of thought or politics, nor do they have any moral compass" (8.26).

The editorialist reproached more benevolent observers in Japan, stating that he had "kind of an odd feeling from the fact that some people constantly propagandise the successes of the Nanjing government" (9.5).

The launching of a reorganised central administration in October did not lead to any marked improvement of such judgment because, according to the writer, the enduring rivalries within the party meant that no real progress had yet been achieved (10.5). If anything, from March 1929 or thereabouts, the break between Chiang Kai-shek and the new Guangxi clique cast the Nationalist leadership in an even more negative light:

We are really appalled that the deeds of what is called the Nationalist Party do not differ in the least from the old military cliques, which had neither ideals nor principles. (3.23)

Although Chiang soon forced his opponents to retreat from Wuhan, the editorialist objected that this was not enough to prevent armed

resistance from emerging again, as the political reasons for dissent were still in place (4.9). It seemed as though the “new military cliques” were heading towards the same kind of “feudalistic territorialism as the old military cliques” (5.19).<sup>7</sup>

After the rebels suffered several defections, however, the *Mainichi* adopted a more optimistic tone, claiming that “small waves on a local scale and resistance by a minority of people are not enough to change the direction of the general trend” (5.26).

Although disturbances in China were inducing many Japanese to look at that country once again with a “derisive attitude”, it should not be forgotten that

peace and unity, like the two Rivers that flow eastward and pour into the sea, are the general trend in China. [...] By taking pleasure in the waves in vain, there is a risk of failing to see the essential flow of the tide. (6.22)

Apparently, the consolidation of Chiang Kai-shek's power persuaded the *Mainichi* that it would be better to deal with his regime in a more constructive spirit. A concurrent factor in this reappraisal was the conclusion of Sino-Japanese negotiations over past incidents, namely: those that had occurred in Nanjing and Hankou in March-April 1927, and the more serious military clash in Jinan. These agreements paved the way to the official recognition of Nanjing as the legitimate government of all China.<sup>8</sup>

The *Asahi*, instead, was steady in its support for the Nationalist government. The only departure from this stance occurred after 19 July 1928, when Nanjing confirmed its intention to regard the trade treaty with Japan as expired. The editorialist, who had expected a moderate turn in Chinese foreign policy (7.12; 7.19), reacted to the announcement with a vigorous protest (7.21). Nevertheless, he was soon able to revert to a more cordial tone, as the government failed to translate its words into action. As bilateral negotiations were taking their tortuous course, the *Asahi* choose to devote only one editorial to the problem of trade boycotts. Moreover, when it touched on that issue it was to denounce Tanaka's inept diplomacy, which had been

<sup>7</sup> Another derogatory opinion had been expressed in an earlier article by journalist Murata Shirō, an expert on Chinese affairs working for the *Mainichi* group: in his view, the Nationalist army and government were “nothing more than military cliques disguised under the name of the Three Principles of the People” (3.24).

<sup>8</sup> Among the newspaper's contributors, the only one who conveyed an optimistic view of China well in advance of the editorial turn was liberal essayist Hasegawa Nyozeikan. In the final instalment of a long article (1.19), he predicted that under the Nationalist government China would use its vast resources to grow into a modern state, and become one day the United States of Asia.

a cause of resentment among the Chinese (12.16; 1.9). The newspaper also remained supportive of Chiang's efforts to centralise power and keep the radical Left outside the administration (9.25; 12.27; 1.3; 2.28; 3.7; 3.14; 3.21; 4.7; 4.11; 5.3; 5.16; 5.23b; 5.30; 6.13; 6.29).<sup>9</sup> The failure of rebellions was invoked as proof that Nanjing was able to guarantee order in China (4.7). While factions such as that of Feng Yuxiang stood for "territorial allotment and feudalism", the one led by Chiang, despite its defects, represented "unity and stability" (5.23b). Therefore, the *Asahi* welcomed Tokyo's belated decision to recognise the Nanjing authorities as China's government, and expressed hopes that an internationally acknowledged status would help the latter to put down any disturbances (5.23a).

#### 4 On Japan's China Policy

Whereas the *Mainichi's* assessment of Nationalist rule in China varied over time, it held fast to a harsh view of Japanese diplomacy under Premier Tanaka, who concurrently held the post of Foreign Minister. This criticism did not concern so much the fundamental objectives in terms of national policy, which consisted in the protection of Japan's rights to the broadest possible extent. The newspaper was rather dissatisfied with the cabinet's attitude and choice of means, which it deemed ineffective, if not outright harmful. As a former army general, Tanaka lacked "a polished method" and inevitably raised suspicions among the Chinese with his aimless talk about "vigorous diplomacy". His cabinet therefore could not help giving "an impression of militarist politics", even when it behaved correctly (8.18). In contrast with Britain and the United States, the administration lacked an understanding of the importance of the press for public communication. This deficiency made Japan vulnerable to astute Chinese propaganda, both on the continent and in "Euro-America" (8.22).

In so far as the *Mainichi* wanted Japan to conduct treaty negotiations without haste (8.15; 9.5; 10.25) and with a firm stand in defence of the existing legal framework (9.16), it had no particular reason to complain about the government's approach. However, as an advocate of prudence (9.27) and better efforts for mutual understanding (8.18; 10.18), the newspaper strongly disagreed with the cabinet's tactics, such as the decision to suspend talks in the attempt to have Nanjing retract its notice of termination of the trade treaty (9.5; 9.8). It also repeatedly called for the withdrawal of troops from Shandong (6.23; 1.30; 3.30).

<sup>9</sup> The editorialist also showed some sympathy for Nanjing's decision to regain control of the salt tax revenues, which had been placed under international management (11.22).

The editorialist was alarmed at the inconsistency of Japan's diplomacy, which wavered between a fruitless hard-line posture (7.25; 11.19) and the consequent, embarrassing retreats. The path leading to the solution of the Jinan incident was a case in point (11.2; 1.30; 2.12; 3.8; 3.13; 3.26; 3.30). Initially, the cabinet had made four demands to China that reflected the concerns of the Japanese commander in Jinan: they asked for a formal apology, punishment of those responsible, reparations, and guarantees for the safety of Japanese nationals and their property. The agreement reached in March, however, included only a joint expression of regret for the unfortunate episode, and entrusted a mixed committee with the task of assessing damage compensation for both sides. The editorialist felt that in the end Japan had "given in almost entirely to China's claims": "The damage to our national prestige and national glory", he commented, "is by no means small".<sup>10</sup> This blunder would also have "extremely serious consequences for the honour and credit of our national army", which had "become the victim of an expedition with political aims" decided by the government (3.13; and again on 3.30). In other words, as at the time of the incident, the *Mainichi* drew a neat distinction between the cabinet and the army, absolving the latter of all responsibility. A few weeks later, the agreement on the Nanjing and Hankou incidents did nothing to improve the writer's opinion about Tanaka. Although Nanjing had accepted the Japanese demands, this had taken so long that it could hardly be considered a success; it seemed, rather, another instance of a "diplomacy of humiliation" (4.18). The only achievement that received a positive reception was the bilateral agreement on tariffs, judged to be satisfactory for both countries. The writer nonetheless pointed out that the real problems were those lying ahead in view of a comprehensive revision of the trade treaty (2.1).

The *Asahi* was even more hostile to the administration. Owing to the "biased and narrow-minded China policy" of his party, the Rikken Seiyūkai, Tanaka had been unable to act beyond a "passive protection of rights", whereas he should have striven to "approach the Southern force and guide the hearts and minds of China". With its aggressive attitude, the government had only caused trouble (7.26; in a similar vein, 8.23). For a few months, the writer detected some encouraging signs of a possible softening on both sides (8.30; 10.18;

<sup>10</sup> According to the writer (2.12), a domestic reason for the cabinet's surrender was its haste to settle the problem before the coming Diet session. The *Mainichi* repeatedly accused the government of bending foreign policy to its own petty schemes. This is especially evident in the newspaper's treatment of the unofficial mission to China of Tokonami Takejirō, a breakaway faction leader from the opposition who would later join the majority party. The editorialist dismissed the trip as a pointless, self-serving political manoeuvre (12.4; 12.9; 12.30). The *Asahi*, though doubtful, expressed some hope that the visit might help improve the situation (12.4; 12.13; 12.16; 12.20).

10.27; 11.1). The stalling of negotiations, however, once again led him to attack the cabinet's "high-handed, uncompromising diplomacy" (11.29), its "ineptitude" (12.20), "adventurism", and lack of "liberal spirit" (12.27).

While the *Asahi* welcomed the resumption of talks (1.17), it also stressed that Tokyo had given up its hard-line posture because this had ended in utter failure (1.24; 2.3). Inquiries in the Imperial Diet offered the editorialist an occasion to recapitulate the cabinet's mistakes, starting from its poor understanding of political trends in China (1.31). The newspaper then welcomed the tariff agreement as a promising step towards an orderly revision of the unequal treaties. However, it regretted that the deal had taken the shape of a simple exchange of notes instead of a treaty, as done by other powers. Seen from that angle, it was another lost opportunity for Japan (2.1). Later on, the writer also scolded Japan's businessmen for not pushing for a revision of the treaty (4.25), and lamented the government's slackness (6.23). News of Tanaka's decision to resign, arguably related to the unsolved issue of responsibilities in the Huanggutun incident, came to the editorialist as a relief "for the state and for the people" (6.30). The *Mainichi*, which deplored the absence of an official explanation for the cabinet's resignation, pointed to its considerable unpopularity as a fundamental factor (7.2).

Concerning the Shandong question, the *Asahi* proposed a solution that in substance matched the one the negotiators would reach months later, and which was modelled on the agreements on the Nanjing incident that China had concluded with the United States and Britain (11.1). The newspaper complained about the cabinet's rigid stance as a cause of delays and boycotts (2.6; 2.21; 3.27). Like the *Mainichi*, it considered the government guilty of creating the conditions that had led to the armed clash in Jinan, while it saw Japan's "loyal and brave" soldiers only as victims (12.27). In response to the deal on the Nanjing incident, the *Asahi* approved its content, but again criticised the cabinet for the delay (4.18; 4.25).

## 5 On the Opposition and the Great Powers

In the *Mainichi*, censure of the current Foreign Minister did not imply support for his predecessor Shidehara Kijūrō, who was a close associate of the main opposition party, the Rikken Minseitō. Commenting on a speech Shidehara had recently delivered in Osaka to an audience of businessmen with vested interests in China, the editorialist recalled the main arguments that the public had put forward so far either against or in defence of his policy. Although the writer did not openly take side with those who accused Shidehara of "weak diplomacy", he agreed that the Minister had failed to

prevent the Nanjing incident by underestimating the impending danger. In his opinion, Shidehara's address regrettably left the audience with "the usual feeling that something was missing". In conclusion, he wrote:

What we demand from any cabinet is a policy that really protects our rights and interest in China; there is no need to make distinctions between hard and soft. (9.19)

As for the Minseitō, the *Mainichi* greatly appreciated an earlier resolution of the party, which clarified its position on foreign policy after a long silence following the Jinan incident. The document deserved praise because, through it, the party had discarded its "non-interventionist tendency to do-nothing and plan-nothing", acknowledged "the special character" of the China policy question, and justified the legitimate reaction of the Japanese army to Chinese aggression in Jinan, while at the same time disapproving of the Shandong expedition and demanding rapid withdrawal. Therefore, unlike previous statements by the Minseitō, this one could signal the unity of public opinion in Japan to China and the world (6.23).

The *Asahi*, on the contrary, appreciated Shidehara (5.8, reappraising his handling of the Nanjing incident) more than the Minseitō. According to the editorialist, the party's statement struck a chord in that it called for a shift from "passive" defence to an active policy of amicable cooperation with China. However, it was too lenient towards the cabinet's dangerous actions (6.23). The Minseitō should make a more sustained effort to promote domestic debate for the sake of national interests (7.27), and not distance itself from "Shidehara diplomacy" in an attempt to look more assertive, as this only exposed its lack of confidence (8.9).

Concerning the influence that other countries exerted over Sino-Japanese relations, the *Mainichi* was annoyed by the US decision to strike a deal with China on tariffs without consulting other powers beforehand:

America, while often talking about peace and international cooperation, always betrays its words. (7.29)

America in the past has behaved selfishly in its effort to implement a policy of capitalist penetration; depending on the circumstances at the time, [it has shifted] from unilateralism to cooperation, from cooperation to unilateralism. (8.1)

For a while, the newspaper looked to Britain as a more reliable partner for the "protection of international ethics" against "China's politicians", who were trying to "infringe on the interests of other coun-

tries unlawfully" (11.29). Therefore, the writer could not hide his disappointment when Britain, too, signed a new tariff treaty with China well ahead of Japan (12.22). He later tried to downplay the significance of the agreement (12.29).

With more restrained language, the *Asahi* too dubbed the US initiative "unfriendly" towards the other countries involved (7.31; on China's urge to regain tariff autonomy, see 8.1). Rather than stressing American opportunism, however, the commentator emphasised that Japan was losing ground to the other powers, owing to the "amateur diplomacy" of the Tanaka cabinet (7.28; also 8.13; 1.9; 2.16) and its "pessimistic view" of Chinese politics (1.3). He warned the government, as well as Osaka business circles, against the illusion of seeking British support to counter China (11.29; 1.19).

## 6 On Manchuria

After the initial response to the North-South negotiations, the issue of Japan's special position in Manchuria was brought up in the *Mainichi* only sporadically (8.12; 10.20; 12.31; 1.13; 1.26; 4.16; 5.16). In support of the established rights, the editorialist cited an essay in *The English Review* (July 1928) that was sympathetic to Japan and critical towards US policy towards China (8.12).<sup>11</sup> News that Zhang Xueliang had received an appointment in the new Nanjing government prompted the writer to object that "the truth is an ignominious surrender of the Fengtian faction" (10.10). A little later, Zhang's dilatory tactics on the problem of land leasing rights for Japanese nationals caused further discontent (10.20). When the Nationalist flag was finally raised in the Northeast, the writer saw this development as "sufficient to cause new worries about the position of our country in ManMō [i.e. Manchuria-Mongolia]", and felt obliged to reassert the inviolability of Japan's rights:

our nation's mind when it comes to the protection of these interests is consistent and immutable. It is by no means something that can be swayed or altered depending on the conditions of the authorities in ManMō, or on those of the rulers of China's mainland with respect to ManMō. (12.31)

From this viewpoint, the execution of Yang Yuting at Zhang's orders was bound to have adverse consequences for Japan. The *Mainichi*

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<sup>11</sup> The anti-US tone peaked in the conclusion of a long article on Japan's rights in Manchuria by Kyoto Imperial University professor Yano Jin'ichi, a specialist of Chinese history (9.11-20). With an Asianist slant, Yano called for close Sino-Japanese cooperation to "lead to repentance the United States, which is concealing the truth of intolerable injustices against both Japan and China".

reckoned that the incident was “one of those that require the highest attention”, since “the Three Eastern Provinces’ relationship with our country is closer than with any other region” (1.13). Nevertheless, the consolidation of Zhang’s power did not induce more explicit reflections in the following months. The autonomy that the Fengtian regime managed to preserve after its formal submission to Nanjing, along with the lack of compelling news, was probably sufficient to keep the question low on the editorial agenda.

Other pieces relating to Manchuria dealt with three issues: the cabinet’s unwillingness to disclose to the Diet the results of the investigation on the Huanggutun incident (1.26); the plan to privatise the Mantetsu (South Manchuria Railway Company; cf. 4.16; 5.16); and Sino-Soviet relations (10.11; 1.12; 5.30; 6.14). With regard to the first topic, the *Mainichi* pressed Tanaka to inform the public thoroughly, so as to dispel suspicions at home and abroad. The writer considered this a requirement in order to overcome the stalemate of official policy in Manchuria (5.16). Regarding the proposal to privatise Japan’s core asset in the region, the newspaper initially endorsed the idea: it seemed like the only way to free the company from political meddling and to reassure China that Japan harboured no aggressive intentions. The writer even recommended that some shares be made available to foreign investors, so as to foster international cooperation. A month later, however, a second editorial reversed this position in light of additional information on the management’s plan. The author concluded that, under the current party administration, the establishment of a board controlled by major shareholders would only “bring the Mantetsu completely into the service of the government”. Moreover, turning to the United States and Britain for loans might “spur their ambitions for direct investment”. As for relations between Zhang’s regime and the Soviet Union, the *Mainichi* noted with some concern the mounting tension over rights on the Chinese Eastern Railway (CER), which would soon escalate into an armed conflict (July-December 1929). At the time, however, the situation in North Manchuria did not yet seem serious enough to require action on Japan’s part.

The *Asahi* pushed its argument for a basic change of policy towards Manchuria even further. It reached the conclusion that Japan should “waive those established rights and interests that exist in name but not in deed”, and “shake hands with the central force in China” to overcome the current stalemate (8.9). It must be stressed, however, that such advice did not mean retreating from the Northeast. The ultimate goal was quite the opposite:

Making this situation, in which Japan is stuck, flexible enough to ensure some development must be the key element in Shōwa Japan’s policy with regard to Manchuria. [...] How could we counter the “force” of China, which is growing day by day, month by

month, only by protecting the old rights and interests? [...] Therefore, our new commitment must be for Japan itself to apply a dissecting scalpel to those established rights and interests which exist in name but not in deed. (8.9)

According to the writer, a 'surgical operation' of this kind was the only way to "make development possible beyond the present state". He did not clarify, though, what the worthless appendages to be cut off were.

Once the South would complete the unification of China, any agreement that Japan might have struck with the Fengtian faction alone would become worthless, or even pose an obstacle to Sino-Japanese understanding (8.9; and again on 8.16; 4.4). Accordingly, the editorialist was not disturbed by the execution of Yang Yuting, who had been opposing Zhang's *rapprochement* with Nanjing. That incident only reinforced his belief that Japan should reckon with the Nationalists' growing influence over Manchuria (1.12). After the Mantetsu President announced his intention to open the company to foreign investors and sell part of its business operations, the writer approved this "open door" policy as a means to dispel international diffidence against Japan. However, he also doubted that similar announcements could bear fruit, as long as the Tanaka cabinet stuck to its "policy of military coercion" (9.13). He severely criticised the Premier for his reticence about the Huanggutun incident, with more insistence than the *Mainichi* (12.27; 4.4; 6.18). By contrast, the Sino-Soviet quarrels did not capture the *Asahi's* attention to the point of becoming the subject of any editorial in this period.

## 7 Conclusions

A comparative analysis of how Japan's two leading newspapers discussed Chinese affairs and Sino-Japanese relations at the early stage of Nationalist rule, as conducted above, reveals that they differed to a significant degree in their respective interpretations of the facts. The *Asahi*, which identified the dominant faction of the Nationalist Party as the only force capable of stabilising China, advocated an active policy of dialogue with the new regime to secure a solid foundation for Japan's economic interests on the continent. This approach involved the rejection of dualistic diplomatic approach to "mainland China" and "Manchuria", of the sort still practiced by the Tanaka cabinet, because the newspaper assumed that the Northeast would become assimilated by the Nationalist state sooner or later.

The *Mainichi* had a more conservative attitude. Although it too was extremely critical of Tanaka's high-handed tactics as detrimental to Japan, its tone towards the Nationalists fluctuated between patronising and derogatory through most of the period examined. The ar-

gument that China still had a long way to go before it could be called a modern state justified a stronger stance for the preservation of Japan's established rights. In particular, the *Mainichi* saw no pressing need to reconsider Japan's position in Manchuria, or its special relationship with the Northeastern regime. In this perspective, Zhang's *détente* with Nanjing appeared more as a threat than an opportunity to pursue a comprehensive solution to pending issues.

Nevertheless, the newspaper's eventual reappraisal of Chinese reunification might indicate that it was starting to accept the prospect of coming to terms with the Nationalists in a more flexible way. While the existing literature provides sufficient grounds to claim that the *Asahi's* basic stance remained unchanged until the outbreak of the Manchurian incident, further research is required to ascertain the extent to which events affected the posture of its main competitor in the second half of 1929, that is during the Sino-Soviet conflict, and after the Central Plains War. In hindsight, it seems that the *Mainichi's* openness to compromise rested on fragile ground, since it took the protection of Japan's core interests in Manchuria as a baseline condition.

On the other hand, Gotō (1987, 300-1) may have overstated the *Asahi's* readiness to give up Manchuria as a Japanese sphere of influence. What the editorialist advocated at that stage was not disengagement from the region, but rather an accommodation with the Nationalist government under a unified China policy. The *Asahi's* stance, therefore, differed from the radical opinion that Japan needed to relinquish its special rights, an opinion which Ishibashi Tanzan had been voicing in the *Tōyō keizai shinpō* since the 1910s (Masuda 2017, 77-86). The *Asahi* did not define the scope of the old rights that Japan needed to waive for the sake of gaining new opportunities. Its policy recommendation stemmed from the assumption that Nanjing would tone down its demands concerning the regaining of sovereign rights.

Once we have ascertained that the two newspapers held different views on Japan's China policy, it is necessary to inquire why this was the case. Neither had proven ties with any political party or other organisation. The *Asahi* was harsher towards the Seiyūkai, but also criticised the Minseitō. Some differences in tone suggest that the *Mainichi* may have had a closer relationship with those business circles that were less willing to undergo a renegotiation of their vested interests in China. At present, though, the evidence is too thin to buttress this conjecture. Another aspect to be considered is the intense competition on the press market. As leading players, both newspapers had an incentive to support views that might appeal to the majority of their potential readership. At the same time, they also strove to acquire a profile that would allow them to stand out from their rivals. Therefore, it is quite safe to conclude that the *Asahi* and the *Mainichi* developed two alternative narratives which both lay within the acceptable boundaries for a large share of the public. In

both cases, however, the question remains to what extent the articles reflect the writers' need to please their readers, and to what extent they represent a genuine effort to lead public opinion. The *Asahi* seemed more inclined to take some risks and keep its line of argument straight, regardless of contingent events.

In any case, the findings presented here suggest that there was still little room for radical assertions in mainstream discourse at the time. Research on other press sources should verify whether mid-size newspapers from this period mostly aligned themselves with the interpretations offered by big ones, or whether they mostly supported arguments that catered to particular segments of society. Finally, it is necessary to stress the inherent weakness of the press as a tool of civilian control over the military. Notwithstanding the anti-militarist mood that prevailed throughout the 1920s, both the *Asahi* and the *Mainichi* accepted the military actions in Jinan as defensive operations, and were unable to bring to light the truth behind Zhang Zuolin's death. Moreover, the *Mainichi* was quite receptive of Nationalist ideas that could justify a harsh reaction in the event of a perceived threat to Japan's vital interests, as would later be the case with the Manchurian incident.

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Note: the transcription of article titles uses characters in the simplified standard form. 'Ed.' stands for 'Editorial'.

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- 5.20. Ed. "Kita Shina no keisei jūdai" 北支那の形勢重大 (Situation of North China Critical).
- 6.9. Ed. "Pekin senryō: aratani kuwawatta Kokumintō no daininmu" 北京占領 新たに加わった国民党の大任務 (Occupation of Beijing: An Additional Great Task for the Nationalist Party).
- 6.14a. Ed. "Shō-shi no jinin: daidō danketsu no kōkikai" 蔣氏の辞任 大同団結の好機会 (Mr Chiang's Resignation: A Valuable Opportunity for a United Front).
- 6.14b. Ed. "Chō-shi no fu to Manshū chian mondai" 張氏の訃と満州治安問題 (Mr Zhang's Obituary and the Issue of Manchuria's Security).

- 6.23. Ed. "Tai Shi mondai kaiketsu: Minseitō to Seiyūkai no tachiba" 対支問題解決 民政党と政友会の立場 (A Solution to Issues with China: The Stances of Minseitō and Seiyūkai).
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