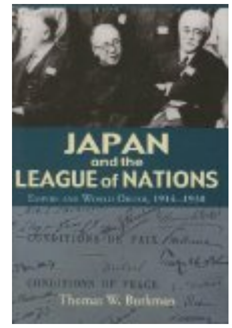
Thomas W. Burkman. *Japan and the League of Nations: Empire and World Order, 1914-1938.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008. xv + 289 pp. $58.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8248-2982-7.



Reviewed by Kelly E. Crager

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Commissioned by Yone Sugita (Osaka University)

In *Japan and the League of Nations*, Thomas W. Burkman recounts the history of Japan's foreign affairs from the close of World War I through the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War. Traditional understanding of Japan's role in the world during this era has been grossly simplified, according to the author, and a new and more balanced treatment of this topic was necessary to help bring about a fuller understanding of the developments in East Asia and the Pacific region prior to the Second World War. Although generally considered to have been an aggressive world power that largely eschewed international involvement to pursue its national interests, the empire, as Burkman insists, was very much committed to the promotion of ideals espoused by Woodrow Wilson and embodied in the League of Nations. Even though the Japanese readily embraced internationalist ideas, and participated fully, Japanese internationalism was influenced by peculiarly Japanese ideas concerning power and place. The author believes that when Wilsonian internationalism began to wane and when the economic pressures of the global depression began to set in, Japanese policymakers sought to protect national interests in the region rather than holding fast to internationalist policies that would make the empire vulnerable to foreign powers.

After explaining the factors that shaped Japan's worldview by 1918, the author provides a nuanced discussion of the empire's perspective on the new and somewhat revolutionary order proposed by Wilson. Although certainly influenced by the empire's liberal, pro-League figures, the Japanese approach to the "Geneva order" was quite cautious. In a very pragmatic fashion, Japanese policymakers weighed the interests of the United States and the great European powers against their own. Seeing the developing fissures in the Great Powers' hopes for the League (such as Wilson's hopes for an association of democratic states, Britain's hopes for a concert of powers to balance international politics, and the French desire for a defensive alliance), the Japanese viewed the League as a worthy entity to help promote cooperation but one through which Japanese interests could also be pursued. As long as the Great Powers would welcome Japan as an equal partner in the new order, and as long as Japanese regional interests were not encumbered by the League's decisions, Japan's participation in global affairs could help bring Japan the long-coveted respect it desired from the Western powers. Indeed, even a skeptical Japan could not turn away from the League because the organization would render decisions that would affect Japanese interests in any regard.

If the domestic voices of caution were not enough to temper Japan's embrace of the League, other members' behavior surely added to Japanese reticence. The well-known rejection of a statement of racial equality in the League's charter, combined with the Great Powers' self-serving actions in both Europe and the Pacific, came to convince Japanese internationalists that although it was indeed a global game, Japanese interests in East Asia and the Pacific could not be subordinated to a League dominated by Britain and France. International agreements made in accordance with the Geneva body were well and fine, but bilateral diplomacy in pursuance of Japanese goals would best serve the empire's purposes. This would prove especially important considering the absence of Japan's great rivals, the Soviet Union and the United States, from most of the League's efforts. As the economic depression brought about increased nationalistic behavior around the globe, including the narrowing of markets for Japanese goods, and as the League proved increasingly unable to meet growing global political crises, the Japanese embrace of the internationalist approach weakened. Left like the other powers to fend for themselves, the Japanese took advantage of regional political, financial, and economic power to assert its interests in China, especially in Manchuria.

The Manchurian crisis, traditionally viewed as the breaking point in Japan's working relationship with the West, proved to be the watershed for Japanese internationalism. Most scholars have held to the belief that Japan was simply working up to this point, and that Japan's adherence to Wilsonian internationalism and the Geneva spirit was a thin veneer used to help Japan achieve its goals on the mainland. Burkman argues that historians came to this conclusion through hindsight, working backward through events to explain Manchuria and eventually Pearl Harbor. The author shows that Japan had always conditioned its participation in the League on the empire's larger interests, and when those interests no longer coincided with the interests of the League, Japan's participation would cease. Far from severing all ties with the international community, Japan continued to participate in international economic and disarmament conferences, and conscientiously tried to create harmonious relations with the empire's most powerful detractors.

Bukman's treatment of Japanese interwar diplomacy is a thorough and very welcome addition to the literature of international affairs. The author's ability to weave prescient interpretive points throughout the general narrative shows a great understanding of the events and of their larger place in international relations. Burkman's judicious use of both Japanese and Western primary sources is outstanding, and he shows an excellent grasp of the historiography of the topic. His handling of the internal and external factors shaping Japanese policy reveals the depth of his immersion into the production of this work, and his efforts have provided a terrific and very readable account of Japanese diplomacy. This is an excellent piece of scholarship.

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