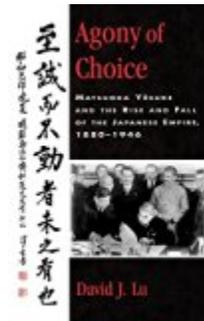


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David J. Lu. *Agony of Choice: Matsuoka Yosuke and the Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1880-1946*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2002. xvi + 309 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0458-3.

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Published on H-US-Japan (May, 2003)



Diplomat As Ham

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“We’re not coming back.” Movie cameras whirred and reporters scrambled at the League of Nations Assembly in February, 1933, when Yosuke Matsuoka swept up his staff and stalked out, even as his words were being translated. He had warned the press to have the cameras ready. Not that taking Japan out of the League was his idea. In fact he had tried to prevent it. Although it could have been left to a formal letter of withdrawal, he had been instructed to walk out.

Dr. Lu, emeritus professor at Bucknell, has translated and updated his biography of Matsuoka, originally published in Tokyo in 1981, thus making available in English a standard work on the colorful Japanese leader.[1] He explains his changes in the preface and chapter endnotes. What emerges is a rounded and engaging narrative.

Matsuoka was an exponent of Japanese expansion: an official of the South Manchurian Railroad, twice a member of the Diet, a politician seriously aiming at the premiership and, as foreign minister, a phenomenon on the international stage. He died while awaiting trial as a war criminal. Coming to America in 1893 as a hungry teenager, Matsuoka ended up as a graduate of the University of Oregon Law School. He held a job supplying contract labor and did not identify with fellow Japanese who were working in the semi-frontier Pacific Northwest. Apparently, he did not feel discriminated against. He had been taken in and cared for by an American family. Indeed, on his way back to Japan after walking out

of the League of Nations, besides meeting with FDR and Herbert Hoover, he dedicated a tombstone to his surrogate mother, with attendant publicity. He was impressed by William Jennings Bryan. He claimed that this youthful experience and later service in Washington enabled him to “understand America.” But his American background may have made him suspect in Japan, and later he read the Oriental classics to go along with the Christianity he embraced at an Oregon Methodist mission. He was, nonetheless, always something of an outsider in Japan.[2] Though he chose the foreign service as an alternative to being drafted for the Russo-Japanese War, throughout his career he was an apologist for military expansion, especially absorption of Manchuria. He was to advocate continued resistance to the Allies in the fatal summer of 1945. At that point he was considered as a last-ditch envoy to the USSR and as premier in a regime that planned to kidnap Hirohito and continue the struggle from the caves of central Honshu, an episode not covered in Lu’s 1981 work.

A year after the drama in Geneva made him famous, Matsuoka launched himself into right-wing politics by advocating the dissolution of political parties and the union of all Japanese under the Emperor (the embodiment of the state), the elimination of liberalism, and the establishment of a controlled economy, all familiar fascist ideas. He had been impressed by Mussolini, and his young followers sometimes hinted at a march on Tokyo. His notion of abolishing political parties made him acceptable to Fumimaro Konoye as a foreign minister. Lu

provides a detailed portrayal of the negotiation of the Tripartite Alliance and the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact, with Matsuoka as a media star. The discussion extends to Matsuoka's final dismissal in 1941 when he was past his prime and tubercular, to boot. Lu's sophisticated account of Matsuoka's grand design of sitting down personally with Franklin Roosevelt and the subsequent unraveling is a riveting tale.

Matsuoka's Americanism was in his manner—brusque, direct, garrulous—which he cultivated. Following his Geneva performance he was touted as a famous graduate of Oakland High School—presumably the same year as Jack London—and by the University of Oregon. He remained a celebrity there until the Pacific War turned him into an “notorious alum.” [3] Lu renders judgment on Matsuoka at the conclusion of the work, as moderate and successful in Far Eastern affairs, but a failure with regards to the United States. He was instrumental in settling the Shanghai Incident of 1931 and could have achieved a face-saving formula in Geneva in 1933 because none of the big League powers was prepared to take strong action against Japan. Instead, buckling under rightist pressure at home, his government decided to withdraw. He misread America's response to being threatened by the Tripartite Alliance and, although forewarned, he and his government were both unprepared for Hitler's stroke against the USSR. He was an incessant talker, so much

so that FDR, no mean talker himself, decided he was crazy. Matsuoka played on the immense stage of Japan's international relations through three decades. Lu tells the story based on archives from Tokyo to Geneva, on access to Matsuoka's private papers, and on numerous interviews. Scholars will be glad to have the work in English. Dr. Lu's previous works include *From the Marco Polo Bridge to Pearl Harbor* (1961) and *A Bicentennial History of the United States* (1976) in Japanese. He writes fluently in English and presumably in this book nothing has been lost in translation. The solitary map is ludicrous and the copy editing falters in places. His endnotes are frank and worth reading; moreover he has thoughtfully translated titles into English. A lesser question raised by the book concerns whether Matsuoka's upbringing really made much difference in his policies or whether “understanding America” was just part of his shtick.

Notes

[1]. David J. Lu, *Matsuoka Yosuke and His Times, 1880-1946*.

[2]. Masaharu Ano, “The Far Western Roots of a World Political Vision,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly*, 98:2 (Summer 1997), pp. 164-204.

[3]. There is no proof of his graduation from Oakland High School; see above, p. 170 and passim.

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Citation: Tom Mayock. Review of Lu, David J., *Agony of Choice: Matsuoka Yosuke and the Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1880-1946*. H-US-Japan, H-Net Reviews. May, 2003.

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