

“I Love Manchukuo Just Like I Love My Body”: Learning Chinese in Imperial Japan

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Abstract:

This presentation examines interwar and wartime Sino-Japanese relations through the lens of Chinese learning in Imperial Japan. Traditionally, the shared lexicon and historical references in classical Chinese and Japanese engendered certain cultural affinity for Japanese scholars of Chinese. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Japanese Sinologists advocated bilateral rapprochement based on linguistic, cultural, and ethnic similarities. Yet the Westernization campaigns in Japan and China from the mid-1800s substantially reshaped their languages. China took after Japan in adopting a vernacular as its standard national language, but this reform made modern Chinese more unfamiliar and difficult for Japanese learners. The relative decline of China's stature in the world and vis-à-vis Japan lowered the appeal of its language to Japanese students, who could choose other modern languages to advance their career or social standing. Few, if any, Japanese studied contemporary Chinese to learn from China. Instead, they acquired it mostly for pragmatic purposes. In 1932, Japan seized Manchuria from China and established the puppet state Manchukuo. The Japanese people responded enthusiastically, not least by developing an interest in contemporary Chinese. Textbook producers rose to meet the new demand and crafted arguments to soothe any qualms about Japanese expansionism. The main theme of Sino-Japanese collaboration remained, though in a different guise. After Japan launched a full-scale war against China in 1937, linguists contributed to the war effort by writing phrasebooks for the military. As Japan conquered more of China, Sinologists produced more diverse works to help soldiers navigate the various Chinese dialects.

Keywords: Chinese, Japanese, Manchuria, linguistics

