H-Diplo Article Review 904 on “Open Door or Sphere of Influence?: The Diplomacy of the Japanese-French Entente and Fukien Question, 1905-1907.”

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Review by Noriko Kawamura, Washington State University

Historians continue to debate what the Open Door doctrine in China really meant in the age of Western imperialism. Critics of U.S. imperialism still question U.S. motives behind the unilateral declaration of the Open Door. The European colonial powers and China’s neighbor, the rising empire of Japan, interpreted the elusive principles of equal commercial opportunity and the territorial and administrative integrity of China to serve their own purposes. With the exception of Russia, the European colonial powers were mainly interested in preserving the status quo in China to protect the spheres of influence which they had already established before the United States declared the Open Door doctrine in China. Japan, on the other hand, was looking for opportunities to expand its spheres of influence by following and manipulating the existing norms of Western imperialist practices in Asia. Ultimately, Japan’s catastrophic military aggressions in China in the 1930s and the subsequent invasions of French Indochina in the early 1940s solidified the standard historical interpretation of Japan as the challenger/violator of the long-standing Open Door policy in China that the Western powers tried to preserve. Consequently, the Open Door policy in China came to have a unique place in the origins of World War II in Asia and the Pacific and colored historical narratives of Japan’s past behavior from the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) to World War II in the Pacific. Even so, questions remain as to when, how, and why Japan began to defy and violate exactly what part of the Open Door principles in China and pose threat to the region.

According to Kim, “the leading conservative Japanese historian Kitaoka Shinichi has emphasized that great powers remained half-hearted about the Open Door and were keen to preserve their exclusive spheres in China,” and “stressed that Japan’s claims for its special interests in China and subsequent ‘advancement’ (Shinshutus) in China until the 1930s had legitimate legal and political grounds.” He
disagrees with this interpretation of the Open Door, while also acknowledging recent studies on the
Anglo-Japanese relations, which confirm “Japan’s ambitious and expansionist activities in China”
during the First World War (106).

Historians seem to agree that the First World War provided Japan with the opportunity to undertake
ambitious diplomatic moves to assert its paramount interests in China, which are best symbolized by
Japan’s Twenty-one Demands on China in 1915. This includes Kitaoka who published a seminal study
on the Imperial Japanese Army during World War I. Kim’s article, however, goes further back to the
beginning of the twentieth century to reveal Japan’s ambitions in southern China and its aggressive
diplomatic maneuvers. Kim focuses on the negotiations of the Japanese-French Entente of 1907 and
demonstrates how Japan endeavored to secure France’s recognition of Fukien (Fujian), which was
located near the coast of the Taiwan Strait as Japan’s sphere of influence. Kim argues that Japan’s
efforts to establish its sphere of influence in Fukien mean that “the Japanese ambition to expand into
central and southern China was, in fact, already prevalent in its government by the end of the Russo-
Japanese War, a decade prior to [the] First World War” (106).

The strength of Kim’s article lies in its detailed account of how France and Japan negotiated the
Franco-Japanese Entente of 1907. He meticulously examines the diplomatic records of the French
and Japanese governments, as well as the British Foreign Office, and reveals how French and
Japanese politicians and diplomats negotiated and concluded the entente in June 1907. Looking at the
motives behind this particular entente in the broader context of the Franco-German rivalry, the
author shows the linkage between France’s desire to contain Germany in Europe and its policy in
East Asia. France as an ally of Russia, at the end of the Russo-Japanese War, encouraged Japan to
forego its claim to war indemnities from Russia. Instead, as part of France’s efforts to forge a
quadruple coalition (among France, Russia, Britain, and Japan) against Germany, the French offered
to extend loan opportunities to Japan. Kim shows how Japan took advantage of the French overture
and attempted to secure French recognition of Japan’s sphere of influence in Fukien, which China
had ceded to Japan in the wake of the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894-95. Taiwan was adjacent to the
province of Guangdong, part of which was within the French sphere of influence in China bordering
on the French colony of Indochina. Kim successfully reconstructs a narrative of the French-Japanese
diplomatic exchanges to show Japan’s opportunistic and aggressive diplomacy concerning Fukien.

Kim’s ultimate argument is that the French-Japanese negotiations exhibited the two countries’
contrasting approaches to the application of the Open Door doctrine. He argues that while Japanese
leaders, who had no serious intention of upholding the Open Door, tried to secure France’s
recognition of Fukien as Japan’s sphere of influence on the ground of its territorial propinquity,
France resisted Japan’s proposal by upholding the Open Door principles to protect China’s
independence and territorial integrity.

This highlighting of the contrasting approaches between France and Japan toward the Open Door in
China raises some questions. Kim argues that “after the Russo-Japanese War, France and Britain
became more willing to support the territorial integrity of China and other elements of Open Door
doctrine in China.” In contrast, he argues, “Japan, as a growing and new imperial power, persistently
aimed at expanding its sphere, attempting to minimize the effect of the Open Door doctrine while also
preserving its ‘freedom of action’ for further expansion into central and southern China” (123).
However, the entente that France and Japan signed does not really present the French as protectors

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of the One Door principles of independence and territorial integrity of China. What Kim does not emphasize is the fact that before agreeing to the Open Door of China, France, along with Britain, had already acquired its spheres of influences in the vast lucrative territories in China, and that both countries were willing to uphold the Open Door doctrine because their spheres of influence had been already established under the Open Door understanding among the great powers. It is important to go back to the Western powers' motives behind the making of the Open Door policy in 1899-1900, which was to maintain the status quo and protect the spheres of influence they had already established in China.

Kim’s article actually suggests that the French utilized the Open Door doctrine to protect their sphere of influence in the three provinces of southern China which bordered on the French colony of Indochina. As expected, in the French-Japanese Entente of 1907, the French government secured Japan’s recognition of the special interests France possessed in “the regions of the Chinese Empire adjacent to the territories” where they had “the rights of sovereignty, protection or occupation,” which meant the French colonial possessions in southeast Asia as well as the French spheres of influence in three provinces in southern China—Yunnan, Guangxi, and Guangdong. In return, the French recognized Japan’s spheres of influence in Korea, South Manchuria, and Inner Mongolia. Furthermore, upon Japan’s insistence, France eventually acknowledged Japan’s claim to its sphere of influence in Fukien on the grounds of territorial proximity in the secret explanatory note attached to the 1907 entente.

Kim’s article offers a good effort to reexamine the French-Japanese entente of 1907 through the lens of the two signatories’ attitude toward the Open Door doctrine, but his attempt to show the “contrasting approaches to the application of the Open Door” (105) of the two countries does not illuminate much of contrast. What the negotiations seem to suggest is that the two imperialist powers undertook diplomatic efforts to settle their claims of spheres of influence in China, and both needed to deal with the Open Door doctrine—France used it as a convenient excuse to reaffirm its spheres, while Japan considered it as an inconvenient impediment. What is not clearly addressed in this study is the inherently problematic nature of the Open Door doctrine from the time of its inception in 1899-1900. The Open Door in China started with unfair advantages to the European empires, which had already established their spheres of influence in China in the nineteenth century. The French negotiators in 1907 were not defending China’s Open Door against the selfish empire of Japan in order to protect the national interests of China or the wellbeing of the Chinese people. They were trying to protect their colony in Indochina and their spheres of influence in China. Moreover, they were trying to pacify the aggressive Japanese empire in China so that they could bring Japan on their side in their global strategy against the German empire.

The article also touches on a potentially more contentious question of Japan’s China policy during the interwar years. The author accepts the optimistic interpretation of the outcomes of the Washington Conference in 1921-1922. He argues that “until the late 1920s, the internationalist leaders of Japan during its Taisho Democracy maintained a non-interventionist approach towards China,” and that the “non-interventionist approach was abandoned after the Manchurian Incident in 1931(123).” This interpretation overlooks many Japanese leaders’ discontents with the Washington Treaty system, which seemed to them to contain Japan’s expansion in China by legalizing the Open Door doctrine in the Nine Power Treaty, as well as by denying Japan’s naval parity with the United States and Great Britain through the naval limitation treaty. This seems to be contrary to the author’s emphasis on
Japan’s assertive and aggressive intentions in the first two decades of the twentieth century, although it is not the central concern of the article.

Despite some questions about its discussion of the French application of the Open Door in 1907 and the Japanese continental policy in the interwar years, Kim’s article reminds us that there is more to study on the problematic legacies of the Open Door politics utilized by the Western empires and Japan, especially prior to World War I.

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