

〈Research, Reference, Texts, Documents〉

The Tanaka Memorial and China-Japan Relations

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Abstract

Unexpectedly asked to speak about the Tanaka Memorial, I gave a lecture at the European University Institute on May 20, 2022. I would like to extend my cordial gratitude to Professor Giulio Pugliese for organizing the lecture. On the Tanaka Memorial, I published a book 13 years ago titled *Nicchū Rekishi Ninshiki: “Tanaka Jōsōbun” womeguru Sōkoku, 1927–2010* [Understanding Sino-Japanese History: Conflict over the Tanaka Memorial, 1927–2010] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2010). One chapter of the book was also published in a book, *Toward a History Beyond Borders: Contentious Issues in Sino-Japanese Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2012), edited by Professors Daqing Yang, Jie Liu, Hiroshi Mitani, and Andrew Gordon.

Key Words

The Tanaka Memorial, China-Japan relations, propaganda, the Showa Emperor, Giichi Tanaka

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Why is the Tanaka Memorial important?

Currently, China's foreign policy, known as Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, is infamous for using hard-hitting propaganda via social media. Historically, however, China's most successful form of propaganda has been its propaganda diplomacy using the forgery of the Tanaka Memorial. Although the latter was far more subtle than Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, it greatly influenced the views of China, the U.S., Russia, and other countries, especially with respect to Japan. Therefore, what I would like to talk about today is the impact of the Tanaka Memorial. The content of what I am about to discuss is based on my book, *Nicchū Rekishi Ninshiki: “Tanaka Jōsōbun” womeguru Sōkoku, 1927–2010* [Understanding Sino-Japanese History: Conflict over the Tanaka Memorial, 1927–2010] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 2010). This

book was published in Japanese by the University of Tokyo Press in 2010, and in the future I hope to translate this book into English. One chapter of the book was also published in a book, *Toward a History Beyond Borders: Contentious Issues in Sino-Japanese Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard East Asian Monographs, 2012), edited by Professors Daqing Yang, Jie Liu, Hiroshi Mitani, and Andrew Gordon. I want to thank Professor Yang for his translation of my paper.

With China's remarkable growth, there is no question that relations with China are a crucial matter to countries worldwide. The importance of China is almost self-evident to its neighbor, Japan. Not only are relations with China important for Japan, but the state of Sino-Japanese relations also determines the stability and development of Asia as a whole. It is also widely agreed that China-Japan relations have stagnated due to friction over historical perceptions. More than 75 years after the end of World War II, distrust and feuds between the two countries have not been dispelled. The problem of historical perceptions began before World War II, and is such a deeply rooted issue that a systematic analysis of modern and contemporary history is necessary to understand the basis of the historical perceptions. It is noteworthy that this issue is related to Chinese propaganda symbolized by the Tanaka Memorial.

For this reason, this lecture will discuss historical issues in Sino-Japanese relations dating back to the 1920s. As a symbol of the divergence in historical understanding, I will focus on the Tanaka Memorial in particular. What then is the Tanaka Memorial? The Tanaka Memorial is a fake document purported to be a letter of the report from then Prime Minister Giichi Tanaka to the Showa Emperor in July 1927. The Tanaka Memorial is probably the most conspicuous document in the history of China-Japan relations. In Japan, it has been evident since before the war that the Tanaka Memorial was a forgery. In Japan, the U.S., the U.K., and other countries, it is common knowledge that the Tanaka Memorial is not genuine but a dubious document. Therefore, the authenticity of the Tanaka Memorial may now be considered essentially settled.

However, there are two reasons for examining the Tanaka Memorial. First, the Tanaka Memorial provides a valuable clue to compare Chinese propaganda and the historical views of various countries. The authenticity of the Tanaka Memorial tends to be believed in China, Taiwan, Russia, and other countries, and consequently, the content of the Tanaka Memorial has influenced the views of other countries toward Japan. The fact that the Tanaka Memorial is often interpreted as authentic in China and other countries arises from a specific background. Nothing can be fruitfully discussed if the Tanaka Memorial is dismissed as just a peculiar document. Therefore, we must investigate the background behind why the Tanaka Memorial is considered authentic.

Second, the Tanaka Memorial played a role in the history of Sino-Japanese relations. As mentioned earlier, the Tanaka Memorial originated in the late 1920s. China and Japan had already argued over the Tanaka Memorial before the Manchurian Incident in 1931, and after the Manchurian Incident it was also discussed at the League of Nations. In particular, the dispute between Yōsuke Matsuoka and Wellington Koo (Gu Weijun, a prominent Chinese diplomat) at the League of Nations is well known. From the Second Sino-Japanese War to the Pacific War, the Tanaka Memorial was used as a propaganda tool not only by China but also by the U.S. In addition, the Tanaka Memorial is important in terms of the relationship between the central and local governments and the formation of public opinion in China. The Tanaka Memorial was also the subject of a trial at the International Military Tribunal for

the Far East (IMTFE) and has been quoted as if it were a historical fact in publications such as *The People's Daily*. Moreover, the Tanaka Memorial has been displayed in Chinese museums as a real document.

Why was the Tanaka Memorial the most widely circulated and influential of the many propaganda efforts? Two points were crucial in China's use of the Tanaka Memorial for propaganda and its worldwide dissemination. First, the Tanaka Memorial was credible because it matched the reality of Japan's aggression in the Asia-Pacific. Second, the Tanaka Memorial was sophisticated, as it falsified the involvement of the Showa Emperor. While Japan's prime ministers changed frequently, the Showa Emperor had been on the throne for more than 60 years before and after the war and could easily have been seen as a symbol of aggression.

Therefore, in this lecture, I would like to talk about the role of the Tanaka Memorial in the history of China-Japan relations. Starting from 1927, the year the Tanaka Memorial is said to have been inscribed, the Tanaka Memorial has been a point of contention in Sino-Japanese public diplomacy since the Manchurian Incident, disputes at the League of Nations, information warfare during the Sino-Japanese War and the Pacific War, the IMTFE, East Asian international politics during the Cold War, historical issues, and even the Japan-China Joint History Research held by the Japanese and Chinese governments in the 21st century, in which I also participated. Next, I will focus on the Tanaka Memorial and discuss the prewar and postwar periods of Sino-Japanese relations, dividing them into six periods.

Beyond the six periods

The first period was from the Eastern Conference held in June 1927 to just before the Manchurian Incident. In the process of circulating the Tanaka Memorial from this period, not only were the Chinese representatives of the Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR) involved but also the Liaoning People's Diplomacy Association and the New Northeastern Society. In response, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs blocked the reading of the Tanaka Memorial by Chinese representatives at the IPR Kyoto conference. Meanwhile, in Northeastern China, the Liaoning People's Diplomacy Association and local newspapers made full use of the Tanaka Memorial despite the Liaoning provincial government's edict to suppress the Tanaka Memorial. The multi-layered structure of Chinese diplomacy continued to play tricks on Japan, culminating in the Manchurian Incident. Although the Tanaka Memorial was introduced to the U.S. through the IPR Kyoto Conference, the State Department's Japan experts Joseph W. Ballantine and Eugene H. Dooman saw it as a forgery.

The second period began after the Manchurian Incident, which was a significant turning point in East Asian international politics, and the Tanaka Memorial made its debut on the international political stage. The two countries engaged in propaganda diplomacy, criticizing each other, and involving the Litton Mission and the media of third countries. As the Sino-Japanese conflict deepened, Sino-Japanese propaganda diplomacy opened a new dimension in international politics. Koo, who had argued with Matsuoka at the League of Nations, appealed to public opinion in other countries as he dodged arguments about the authenticity of the Tanaka Memorial. The Tanaka Memorial's international popularity was partly due to a propaganda campaign by the Chinese Nationalist Party's Central Publicity

Committee. The Comintern magazine reproduced the Tanaka Memorial in its entirety, and the Chinese Communist Party's August 1 Declaration cited the Tanaka Memorial as a plot to destroy China.

The third period was from the Second Sino-Japanese War to the Pacific War. When the Second Sino-Japanese War became prolonged, Chiang Kai-shek personally used the Tanaka Memorial in a lecture at the fifth plenary session of the Chinese Nationalist Party's fifth Central Executive Committee. The Tanaka Memorial was also used in radio broadcasts from Chongqing to the U.S. This was directed by the Central Propaganda Department of the Chinese Nationalist Party; Japan had no equivalent organization. In contrast, the U.S. State Department did not use the Tanaka Memorial for publicity, but the Tanaka Memorial became known through *The New York Times* and other media. Leon Trotsky was also a strong advocate of the Tanaka Memorial's authenticity, and he published an article on the subject in *The Fourth International*. In the U.S., the Tanaka Memorial was utilized in radio broadcasts and propaganda films during the Pacific War.

The fourth phase was the Japanese occupation. Once the Japanese occupation began, the controversy over the Tanaka Memorial shifted to the IMTFE. The Tanaka Memorial was widely accepted as authentic in the U.S. immediately after the war, and the GHQ considered it authentic, at least in the early stages of the occupation.

This seems to have influenced the expulsion of Ichirō Hatoyama, the chief secretary of the Tanaka cabinet, from public office. In the IMTFE, the International Prosecution Section (IPS) initially considered the Tanaka Memorial authentic and relentlessly interrogated Kōichi Kido, Kōki Hirota, Kuniaki Koiso, and Shigeru Yoshida. The court was swayed by the testimony of Qin Dechun and others regarding the Tanaka Memorial and accepted the deposition of Grigorii Mikhailovich Semenov, who claimed to have heard from Tanaka himself that it was real. Nevertheless, the Tanaka Memorial was mooted midway through the hearing, perhaps because the IPS realized that it was a forgery. Although it did not affect the judgment itself, the Tanaka Memorial was one of the reasons the IMTFE went astray.

The fifth period was the Cold War. In Taiwan in the 1950s, Cai Zhikan once told newspapers that he had obtained the Tanaka Memorial at the Imperial Palace. Although he was honored by the Chinese Nationalist Party, the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs was indifferent to his story. This makes it difficult to believe that Cai was the originator of the Tanaka Memorial. During the Cold War, the Tanaka Memorial was used by the Soviet Union for anti-Japanese propaganda and was believed to be authentic in the U.S. until around the 1960s. In China, the Tanaka Memorial appeared in *The People's Daily* on the 30th anniversary of the Manchurian Incident; the People's Republic of China also used the Tanaka Memorial to criticize "Japanese militarism" and Japanese history textbooks on historical issues.

The sixth phase is the post-Cold War period. The historical issues that resurfaced after the late 1990s eventually resulted in the Japan-China Joint History Research. Even at the end of the 20th century, the Tanaka Memorial was still used by *The People's Daily* and other publications in connection with historical issues. As a result of the reforms of the Japanese Embassy in China around April 2004, the Information and Culture Center filed a complaint with *The Beijing Youth Daily*, television stations, and memorial museums, claiming that the Tanaka Memorial was a forgery. As anti-Japanese demonstrations increased in China, there was a temporary upsurge in reliance on the Tanaka Memorial, but it has since

fallen out of favor. Three factors should be mentioned: (1) public relations diplomacy led by the Japanese Embassy in China; (2) private exchanges symbolized by the Chinese translation of a book, *Toward a History Beyond Borders*; and (3) the Japan-China Joint History Research.

Even though the gap between Japan and China over the Tanaka Memorial is finally closing, it will take considerable time before the academic community's views are generally understood in Chinese society. It will require great time and effort for the achievements of the Japanese academic community to be accepted by the Chinese academic community and to penetrate further among the Chinese masses. Even so, the understanding that it is a forgery could become mainstream in China, just as it did in the U.S. and Taiwan in the past.

Two riddles

Thus, the Tanaka Memorial has been controversial not only in Sino-Japanese relations but also at the League of Nations and the IMTFE. However, two questions remain.

First, who was the creator of the Tanaka Memorial? Cai Zhikan claims to have personally copied the Tanaka Memorial at the Imperial Palace with the help of Nobuaki Makino and others, but this is doubtful. If a Japan-based person like Cai had provided the information, the Tanaka Memorial would not have contained so many errors. Japanese newspapers at the time were quite accurate in their reporting of the Eastern Conference. Therefore, the Tanaka Memorial seems to have been created by an organization in Northeastern China. The real creator of the Tanaka Memorial is likely to have been either Wang Jiazhen's associates, the New Northeastern Society, or the Northeastern Society. Given that Wang suppressed its circulation, it is highly probable that the New Northeastern Society or the Northeastern Society was responsible for its creation. In this regard, the Tanaka Memorial was described in the record of the Security Bureau, the Colonial Government of Kwantung, as it was being distributed.

Second, how and when did the Chinese government learn that the Tanaka Memorial was a forgery? Even before the Manchurian Incident, the Japanese legation and consulates general in China had requested the Chinese government to crack down on the Tanaka Memorial. The fundamental errors of the Tanaka Memorial were also fully asserted at that time. After receiving protests from Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu and others, the KMT Foreign Ministry published the Tanaka Memorial's errors in *The Central Daily News*. In other words, it is almost certain that the KMT Foreign Affairs Office had been trying to quell the issue until the Manchurian Incident and knew the Tanaka Memorial was a forgery from the very beginning.

International politics as information warfare

What lesson has the nearly century-long controversy over the Tanaka Memorial taught us? In short, it is the gravity of information warfare in international politics. The Tanaka Memorial is often scoffed at in Japan, but its influence goes far beyond a single historical episode; it is a subject that deserves to be addressed head-on. It must be said that Japan lost not only the Pacific War but also the propaganda surrounding its image. The Tanaka Memorial has been used repeatedly in Chinese, Taiwanese, Soviet,

and U.S. newspapers and magazines as if it were historical fact. The influence of this propaganda has lasted for well over half a century since the end of the war. If we do not look back on the Tanaka Memorial as fabricated propaganda, we have not clarified anything. From the perspective of historical research, we should ask ourselves why the Tanaka Memorial, which is clearly a forgery, is so easily believed to be authentic in so many countries and why there is such a divergence from the Japanese view.

The Tanaka Memorial also demonstrates the enormous role of propaganda and the media in contemporary politics. The Tanaka Memorial, which started out as a trifling anti-Japanese document that was so flawed that at one point even the Nationalist government tried to suppress it, became an opportune propaganda tool for China in the aftermath of the Manchurian Incident. Furthermore, the Tanaka Memorial played a role in the information warfare involving the media in other countries and was the subject of a hearing at the IMTFE that nearly influenced the conspiracy theory.

When we recall the information warfare during the war and its long-lasting influence after the war, we see that the Tanaka Memorial cannot be dismissed as a mere quirk of fate, as it was disseminated around the world. However strange it may seem, behind it lie propaganda and the media. Symbolic of this is the debate between Matsuoka and Koo at the League of Nations. Matsuoka, who argued with Koo at the League of Nations, might have grinned with satisfaction when he debunked the Tanaka Memorial as a forgery. However, third-party media, including media from the U.S., reported both sides of their debate. In terms of international publicity, Koo benefited the most. Appealing to truth or falsehood in the arena of information warfare does not always benefit the national interest, even if the claim is correct.

In addition to its former use for propaganda, the persistence of the Tanaka Memorial in China and Taiwan is related to the compilation of party histories. Luo Jialun and Hu Qiaomu, who played leading roles in compiling the histories of the KMT and the Chinese Communist Party, both used the Tanaka Memorial as an embodiment of Japanese aggression. Even obviously forged documents and myths are difficult to deny once circulated abroad, and it took decades for the U.S., Japan's postwar ally, to establish that the document was a forgery. For this reason, the role played by Japan specialists in the U.S. State Department in clearing up the misunderstanding cannot be overlooked. Even though the Japan-China Joint History Research and other efforts have corrected some of the misperceptions surrounding the Tanaka Memorial, the influence of wartime propaganda has had a continuing effect on international politics since the Showa period. Therefore, public diplomacy, image strategy, and information warfare in international politics are increasingly essential issues for both policy and research. This is the contemporary significance of discussing the Tanaka Memorial.

The above history will enable us to consider contemporary issues from multiple perspectives. Even an obvious forgery can be used to shape opinions of Japan, and, significantly, there were few Japan specialists, even in the U.S. State Department, who could recognize the Tanaka Memorial as a forgery. If one heedlessly challenges the authenticity of historical issues, even if the claims are valid, they can be used as propaganda. In forming a view of Japan, in addition to propaganda, the influence of the foreign media is also significant. Apart from the facts, there is also the dimension of information warfare in international politics, which influences foreign countries' views of Japan. At least as far as

the Tanaka Memorial is concerned, it can be said that there was an information war behind the historical perception. The Tanaka Memorial, which has been circulated for nearly 100 years, conveys today the power of propaganda and information in international politics.

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