

Research on the Grand Vision of Japan's Greater Asia Propaganda Based on the Clues of Asia Express

Yixun Wang

Arts in History and Culture of South China, Hong Kong Chu Hai College, Hong Kong, 999077, China

Keywords: "Manchuria Railway"; Puppet Manchukuo; Asia; Middle Eastern Railway; Greater Asiaism

Abstract: The SL7 steam locomotive exhibited at the Shenyang Railway Steam Locomotive Museum is of the Victory 7 type, manufactured by the "Mantetsu" Dalian Locomotive Factory in 1934. In that year, it operated on the South Manchuria Railway, connecting Dalian and Changchun, later extending to Harbin, until its discontinuation in 1943. In 1933, Mantetsu, through a special budget plan, first developed the Asia Express train set. Mantetsu showcased ambitions surpassing technological, economic levels, and regional demands, defining the Asia Express as a world-leading standard. This luxurious train exceeded the actual needs of Northeast China at that time, reflecting the contradictions in Japan's imperial propaganda. The Asia Express was, in reality, a distorted creation constructed at considerable cost for external propaganda, portraying an unreal brilliance and prosperity under Japanese rule. This paper will delve into the Asia Express train, offering a glimpse into Japan's propaganda vision for Greater East Asia, and revealing the political intentions and propaganda methods behind it.

1. Introduction

In the early 20th century, as the Japanese Empire expanded its influence in East Asia, the Asia Express train became a symbol of its grand vision for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. This train, serving not only as a means of transportation but also as a skillfully crafted political propaganda tool by the Japanese authorities, aimed to shape the order of Greater East Asia. Through the manufacturing and operation of the Asia Express, Japan sought to showcase its "surreal prosperity" surpassing the West on the international stage. Additionally, it aimed to instill a sense of "New Imperial Citizens" consciousness in alignment with its ruling requirements through education and cultural influence^[1]. This paper will delve into the Asia Express train, offering a glimpse into Japan's propaganda vision for Greater East Asia, and revealing the political intentions and propaganda methods behind it.

In recent years, there has been a gradual refinement in the study of the colonial history of the Japanese Empire in the northeastern region of our country, with a particular emphasis on the micro-level analysis of the puppet state of Manchukuo, which has become more prominent in the past five years. The focus of the research includes the operation and construction of the South Manchuria Railway by Mantetsu, as well as the impact of the Asia Express train on Manchukuo and Japan. The

academic community in Japan continues to show a strong interest in these studies, especially with the scholarly evaluations of the Asia Express maintaining the propagandist perspective of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere ^[2]. Therefore, through specific instances, a more precise understanding of Japan's current strategic vision and propaganda aspirations for Greater Asia can be gained, holding significant research value.

2. Surreal External Propaganda Demands and the Operation of the Asia Express Train

In the 1933-1934 Chicago World's Fair, Japan attempted to secure an independent pavilion for the puppet state of Manchukuo, but Chinese representatives vehemently protested, citing its lack of international status ^[3]. China demanded the termination of all propaganda activities insulting and dividing Chinese sovereign territory, threatening to withdraw from the World's Fair. The United States had already declared it would never recognize Manchukuo at its inception, and Japan failed to establish a "Manchukuo" pavilion during the World's Fair ^[4]. With comprehensive support from the South Manchuria Railway Company, Japan instead set up a "grand" exhibition hall for "Manchukuo" within the pavilion, resembling architecture from China's Later Jin period, reflecting Japan's urgent need to establish the legitimacy of Manchukuo.

On August 25, 1933, Mantetsu locomotive headquarters designer Ichihara Yoshikazu received orders to conduct inspections in Europe and the United States. His tasks included improving passenger car structures, developing air adjustment devices, and increasing locomotive speed. Ichihara Yoshikazu successively visited the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium, Germany, and finally returned to Shanghai, China, after his last stop in Italy. Throughout the lengthy inspection process, Ichihara Yoshikazu greatly praised the achievements of the fascist regimes in Germany and Italy, while strongly criticizing the political and economic chaos and inefficiency of the democratic systems in France, the United States, and Britain. Particularly, he provided a comprehensive denial of the political and economic chaos in post-World War I France ^[5].

The Asia Express train consisted of a locomotive and six passenger cars. These included one postal and baggage car, two third-class cars, one dining car, one second-class passenger car, and one first-class observation passenger car. In contrast, Germany's "Bauart Hamburg Flyer" consisted of two passenger cars, while the United States' "Union Pacific" and "Zephyr" had three cars each. After six months, the Asia Express cars were produced at Mantetsu's Shahekou factory.

Ichihara Yoshikazu then returned to oversee the overall design of the Asia Express train at Mantetsu headquarters. Alongside designer Yoshino Shintaro, a graduate of the South Manchurian Industrial School, they were responsible for the front part of the Asia Express train. The design of the front part of the Asia Express train featured a streamlined blue body, weighing 200 tons, utilizing full steam power, and equipped with the most advanced automatic coal-feeding device of the time, 2000mm diameter driving wheels, and air-conditioning.

The Asia Express train stood out in luxury. During the scorching summer with temperatures reaching 35 degrees Celsius, the interior could maintain around 26 degrees, and in the cold winter, the temperature inside could be kept at 18 degrees. At that time, neither Japanese nor European railway trains were fully equipped with air conditioning. Even the most luxurious trains in the United States only provided limited air conditioning in the dining cars. Therefore, the luxury of the Asia Express train was truly exceptional.

The train had six cars, including a baggage and mail car, a dining car, and four passenger cars. Each train could accommodate a maximum of 288 passengers, a quite strict limitation compared to modern Japanese Tokaido Shinkansen trains (16 cars, 1323 passengers per train). With only one daily service, stations often saw people selling "special express tickets" at high prices for the day. The interiors of the cars used Manchurian walnut and Japanese cherry wood, creating a luxurious

atmosphere ^[6]. The furnishings and equipment materials reflected Mantetsu's extravagant style surpassing practical needs.

On November 1, 1934, the Asia Express train officially started operating from Changchun to Dalian. In reality, deploying such an ultra-luxurious "super express" train in Northeast China at that time far exceeded the economic and transportation needs of the region.

The population growth in the Northeast was mainly caused by the influx of Japanese and Koreans, leading to a surge in labor force and a widespread demand for affordable and convenient railway transportation. Mantetsu had conducted extensive railway construction in the Northeast from 1897 to 1903, with particular emphasis on the development of towns along the South Manchuria Railway. Shortly after the Mukden Incident in 1935, Japan completed the "purchase" of the concession for the Soviet Union's Middle East Railway, merging the South Manchuria Railway with the Middle East Railway to form a T-shaped economic zone linked by railway transportation. This railway connected to the Korean Peninsula's railway system, creating a broader economic belt. Although the overall economy in the Northeast during the Manchukuo era was stronger than in the Three-Provinces Period of coexistence, Japan seemed not to genuinely consider activating the civilian economy in Northeast China through this high-quality infrastructure. Instead, they actively discouraged large-scale population movements in Northeast China under any economic pretext. Therefore, the construction of the Asia Express train was apparently not intended to meet the real economic and transportation needs of connecting the Northeast, and its significance and the vision of the Japanese rulers probably had both internal and external aspects

3. The Propaganda Steps Formulated by Mantetsu and Its Propaganda Vision

The propaganda steps taken by Mantetsu can be roughly divided into two stages. Firstly, by employing the American-style rhetoric of 'Heaven Determines Destiny,' Mantetsu defined the puppet state of Manchukuo as an internal issue of China. It portrayed Japan as a victim, asserting that the Japanese authorities were suppressing the 'Manchurian Independence' movement to defend the 'legitimate' rights acquired during the Russo-Japanese War, thus creating conflict with the Chinese authorities. This strategy utilized 'American' colonial discourse to garner sympathy from Western countries led by the United States, albeit driven more by apprehension of America's comprehensive influence in the Pacific region.

Mantetsu adopted a dual strategy for propaganda. Firstly, it depicted the Northeast region of China under the rule of Zhang Zuolin and Zhang Xueliang as a brutal military warlord regime. Through falsifying data and distorting facts, it sought to prove that the Zhangs had exploited the Northeast for over a decade. Simultaneously, the independence of Manchukuo was portrayed as a self-revolution in the political order of the 'Manchuria' region. Under the leadership of Puyi, Manchukuo claimed to have successfully waged an armed struggle against corrupt warlords and initiated reforms in the modernization of its political system, aligning with the Western narrative of 'national sovereignty and self-determination.

Secondly, Mantetsu constructed a false image of a 'hyper-modernized Manchuria,' emphasizing its prosperity through symbolic facts. Mantetsu was well aware of Western standards for modern 'civilization.' Therefore, its external propaganda was essentially based on the 'standard answers' set by Western 'civilization' discourse. Mantetsu's portrayal of Manchukuo's external propaganda demonstrated its understanding of Western 'civilization' standards.

Politically, due to Manchukuo being propped up by Japan, it faced inherent limitations in implementing a democratic republican system that could surpass Japan's political structure. Therefore, the emphasis was on reflecting the 'principle of equality' under a monarchy as much as possible, as evident in the proclaimed 'Five Races Harmoniously United' in the founding declaration of

Manchukuo. Mantetsu's external propaganda claimed that, under Japanese and Manchukuo efforts, the 'Manchukuo' society had successfully resolved ethnic and public security issues. Manchukuo had achieved long-term stability and harmony, and due to the 'good name of the righteous path,' people from within China had begun to migrate eagerly to 'Manchukuo.'

If the 'principle of equality' emphasized by Manchukuo corresponds to its democratic standards, then the standards respecting life and valuing health since the Enlightenment in the West can be summarized as 'livelihood.' Mantetsu emphasized the improvement of the health conditions of the 'Manchukuo citizens' through the extensive construction of hospitals and medical facilities as a core indicator of 'livelihood,' which was considered the heart of Western 'civilization' standards. Mantetsu highlighted this aspect in its propaganda and achieved some 'miraculous effects.' The New York Times praised 'Colorful Manchuria' in an article on the hospitals and medical facilities of 'Manchukuo.'

Due to the strict 'enslavement education' implemented under Japanese rule in Manchukuo, Mantetsu almost refrained from extensive external propaganda in the field of education.

The aforementioned propaganda led by Mantetsu, although appearing to approach the average level of some Western civilized countries, had to find an alternative way to make the Western 'civilized world' feel the shock of the 'hyper-real civilization' of Manchukuo. Mantetsu had to take a different path.

In the early stages of external propaganda, Mantetsu focused more on promoting the prosperity of the Northeast Asian aviation industry, mainly led by Manchuria Aviation Company. Manchuria Aviation Company had imported seven Fokker 'Super Universal' passenger planes and two Fokker F.VII b-3m tri-motor passenger planes in November 1932. In January 1934, it imported a Clark GA43 transport plane from the General Aviation Company of the United States, compensated by General Aviation for two crashes during test flights with one de Havilland DH.80 'Moth' plane.

Since the massive import of Western aircraft, Manchuria Aviation Company was evidently dissatisfied with merely showcasing the standards of 'independent and self-developed Manchukuo.' It failed to meet the criteria of surpassing Western standards to give the Western world a 'shock.' Thus, constructing independent civil technology products became one of the few choices for Mantetsu. This was the basis for the 'unique' value of the Asia Express (Asuka) train. Firstly, during the construction process of the Asia Express, although it referenced the design language and technology of many contemporary Western trains, especially other Japanese constructions in Manchukuo, the Asia Express was undoubtedly one of the few 'oddities' in the hands of the Japanese authorities that could meet the criteria of 'independent and self-developed' characteristics. Secondly, the Asia Express achieved a comprehensive surpassing of the technological level and luxury compared to similar products from developed Western countries at the time. Therefore, compared to other propaganda approaches of Manchukuo, the Asia Express not only withstood scrutiny from inspection teams of various countries but also provided passengers experiencing its quality with a feeling of being ahead of its time and a 'shock.'

Therefore, after the Asia Express was introduced, both Japan and 'Manchukuo' extensively covered its 'majestic' features in numerous news articles. They depicted how its performance led the world, attracting the attention and interest of many developed Western countries.

Since its operation, due to Mantetsu and the Japanese authorities making relentless efforts in external propaganda, every foreign delegation visiting Northeast China was invited to ride the Asia Express. Consequently, Western countries experienced a significant 'change' and groundbreaking 'shock' regarding the civilization level of 'Manchukuo.'

For instance, during the trial operation of the Asia Express, the British Industrial League Far East Survey Team, led by Hambi, visited Northeast China. They were allowed to take a test ride on the Asia Express, and the Hambi Survey Team highly praised the Asia Express.

In October 1934, the Japan Newspaper Association invited a delegation of American news agencies to visit the Northeast, and the delegation rode the Asia Express. According to Market Shimizu, a 'Mantetsu' technician who accompanied them, "The group gathered in the observation room, and I gave detailed explanations about the vehicle's structure, the speed of the train, and various equipment. The group expressed high admiration for the magnificent appearance, luxurious interior layout, and comfortable air environment of the Asia Express."

On the other hand, the internal propaganda impact generated by the Asia Express almost surpassed Mantetsu's expectations. As one of the national symbols of the puppet state of Manchukuo, the Asia Express was embraced in the propaganda discourse and public sentiment of the Japanese, who regarded 'Manchukuo' and 'Korea' with the narrative of 'an elder brother as a father.' Consequently, the propaganda featuring the Asia Express as the 'protagonist' was highly welcomed within Japan during that time.

Former president of the Japan Railway Transport Association, Junro Ono, recalled from his youth, stating, 'The image of 'Manchukuo' was the Russo-Japanese War and the Asia Express.' Especially, the photos of the 'Asia Express' advancing vigorously on the fertile plains of 'Manchukuo' remained firmly etched in the memories ^[7].

In conclusion, the manufacturing of the Asia Express not only held significance in the context of transportation and logistics in Northeast Asia but also symbolized Mantetsu and the Japanese Empire's internal and external propaganda strategy in constructing a grand Asia strategy. As a false symbol of 'Manchukuo,' the Asia Express embodied Mantetsu's strenuous efforts in creating a 'hyper-real prosperity' centered around the Japanese Empire, shaping the 'new imperial citizens' in line with its ruling requirements, and providing public opinion and psychological foundation for the imperialistic nature of aggression. The disparity between propaganda and reality exposed the contradiction in the political direction and ideology of the Japanese authorities at that time. Japan had embarked on the path of imperialistic expansion, making it impossible to adhere to the Asianism proposed by Okawa Shumei. The new Asianism ideology could not completely legitimize colonial aggression. Therefore, in the field of propaganda, extensive fabrication of facts, confusion of conceptual discourse, and construction of new concepts were required. Building a 'hyper-real' image of advancement and civilization became the 'fig leaf' to cover up its aggressive and reactionary actions. The birth of the Asia Express was essentially a woven 'new clothes for the king' by the Japanese authorities to conceal their aggression. With Japan's failure in World War II, the illusion constructed by the Asia Express also dissipated into thin air.

4. Conclusion

The manufacturing and operation of the Asia Express train represented the grand plan of the Japanese authorities in the early 20th century to construct the Greater East Asian Order. However, as history unfolded, this propaganda vision ultimately retreated step by step during World War II. The 'hyper-real prosperity' embodied by the Asia Express also vanished into thin air with Japan's successive defeats in the war. The historical narrative of the Asia Express reflects the contradictory political direction and ideology of the Japanese regime at that time, as well as the extensive fabrication of facts and confusion of concepts in the field of propaganda. This chapter of history provides us with a profound reflection and holds important lessons for understanding the political calculations and real challenges faced by Japan in its propaganda vision of the Greater East Asia

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