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Asia in 2023: Navigating the US-China rivalry

Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Filippo Boni
Diego Maiorano

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A large, intricate, light-colored floral or mandala-like pattern is positioned in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the text area.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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CONTENTS

IX *Foreword*

- 1 SILVIA MENEGAZZI, *China in 2023: Stimulating Economic Recovery along with Patriotic Education*
- 23 GIULIA SCIORATI, *China in 2023: A «Global-Security-Attentive» Foreign Policy*
- 39 MARCO MILANI & ANTONIO FIORI, *Korean peninsula 2023: A year of rising tensions and political polarization*
- 65 GIULIO PUGLIESE & MARCO ZAPPA, *Japan 2023: Still walking in Abe Shinzō's footsteps*
- 125 THAN KIŪ, *Hong Kong 2023: The new Chinese province*
- 145 AURELIO INSISA, *Taiwan 2023 and the 2024 Elections: A DPP partial victory after a contested electoral campaign*
- 167 MIGUEL ENRICO G. AYSON & LARA GIANINA S. REYES, *The Philippines 2022-2023: A turbulent start for the New Era of Marcos leadership*
- 187 EMANUELA MANGIAROTTI, *Malaysia 2023: A reform agenda overshadowed by identity politics*
- 203 RICHARD QUANG-ANH TRAN, *Vietnam 2020-2023: Covid Pandemic Recovery, Unprecedented Leadership Turnover, and Continued Multilateralism*
- 217 CAROLINE BENNETT, *Cambodia 2022-2023: Securing dynastic autocracy*
- 235 MATTEO FUMAGALLI, *Myanmar 2023: New conflicts and coalitions reshape war narrative, challenging an embattled junta*
- 259 DIEGO MAIORANO & RAGHAW KHATTRI, *India 2023: Towards the general elections amid rising social tension*
- 301 IAN HALL, *India 2023: Tactical wins and strategic setbacks in foreign policy?*
- 323 MATTEO MIELE, *Nepal 2020-2023: From the Institutional Crisis to New Political Paths*
- 339 DIEGO ABENANTE, *Sri Lanka 2023: Wickremesinghe's first six months between economic recovery and political uncertainty*
- 353 MARCO CORSI, *Pakistan 2023: Multiple crises in the lead-up to the general elections*
- 375 FILIPPO BONI, *Afghanistan 2023: Taliban governance and international isolation*
- 389 GIORGIA PERLETTA, *Iran 2023: Intensified Focus on the Eastward Strategy and Ongoing Fractures in State-Society Relations*
- Special articles*
- 407 ENRICO FARDELLA, *When history rhymes: China's relations with Russia and the war in Ukraine*
- 433 DAVID SCOTT, *The return of the 'Indo-Pacific'*
- 451 *Reviews*
- 479 *Appendix*

A COUNTY IN MANCHUKUO

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Filippo Dornetti, *Integrazione politica e società nella Manciuuria coloniale: L'Associazione della Concordia nella Contea del Fushun*, Milano: Franco Angeli, 2021, 130 pp. (ISBN 978-8-83-514620-9).

Manchukuo was the puppet state created in the early 1930s by the Japanese in Manchuria. The head of the state was Puyi, the last emperor of the Manchu dynasty who had been forced to abdicate the Celestial Empire while still a child in February 1912. The state of Manchukuo is known among scholars beyond the compass of Asian history because the conquest of Manchuria marked, together with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia a few years later, the breakdown of the balance and rules defined by the League of Nations after the First World War. Despite its importance in the history of international relations, the internal political history of Manchukuo remains largely on the margins of Western historiography. Filippo Dornetti's book *Integrazione politica e società nella Manciuuria coloniale: L'Associazione della Concordia nella contea del Fushun* fills this lacuna. The text is a rare study on the Concordia Association of Manchukuo. The Association owes its name to its primary objective, namely the realization of the principle of 'concord among peoples' (*minzoku kyōwa*) of the state, a concept exalted in the Declaration of Independence, but born in Japanese circles in Manchuria at the end of the 1920s (pp. 13-14). The harmony between peoples has been interpreted by historiography as the legitimization of the Japanese occupation and the protection of the Japanese minority in the territory. Writing that «L'armonizzazione di interessi contrapposti, però, fu un problema politico reale che l'Associazione consegnò alle sue sezioni locali» (p. 14) Dornetti presents, on the basis of primary sources, a more careful and complex reading of the political and ideological space outlined by the Association. The state-building program that historiography has been able to grasp in the fundamental motivations of the Association is not denied. However, it is presented by the author as part of the task of mediation and resolution of problems at a local level – undertaken by the Association through the village elites – between the different groups. On an organizational level, the Concordia Association mirrored the territorial organization of Manchukuo, but despite its top-down structure the territorial branches had been able in the first years of independence to maintain a certain autonomy until 1937. The Association, its structure, membership and working methods are analysed in detail through the study of the specific case of Fushun County, in the Fengtian region.

The first chapter of the book presents the birth of the Manchu Youth League in the city of Fushun in 1928. The author starts from the pre-eminent role of the South Manchuria Railway Company in Manchuria, and in particular in Fushun, analysing the growth of the city driven by coal mining. Dornetti presents its successes, related in particular to mining – and its difficulties especially in the chemical and food sectors, with the exception of rice cultivation, reconstructing attentively the economic and demographic framework that characterized Fushun. The last part of the chapter is dedicated to the birth of the Manchu Youth League (*Manshū seimen renmei*) in 1928, the year of the assassination of Zhang Zuolin, the warlord of Manchuria. The League was founded by Japanese colonists, and, after the Japanese occupation, it was called the Concordia Association of Manchukuo (*Man-shūkoku Kyōwakai*). The League had its roots in another Japanese organization, the Manetsu Employees' Association, but was open to a more varied composition.

The second chapter highlights the reasons for the strength, evidenced by the widespread membership, of the Association in Fushun County, i.e. the relationship between the Japanese settlers and the Chinese village elites. The time span goes from the beginning of the occupation until 1943. The socio-economic picture of the rural areas of Fushun County is first presented on the basis of a 1934 investigation within a report by the Kyōwakai of Fushun. The author goes on to analyse the role of the elites of the villages and their relationship with the Association. Over the years, these elites became mediators between the Association and the rest of the population. They were essentially the pivot of the Association in the villages. Agriculture was modernized, while the traditional social structure was maintained. Part of the chapter then focuses on membership and changes on an organizational level. Despite the economic difficulties due to the military conflict - in particular from 1937 when taxation increased and actions aimed at social welfare ceased - many farmers did not leave the Association with a view to personal gain.

The third chapter is dedicated to the project of the Concordia Irrigation Society, as part of a broad analysis of rice growing in Fushun County from the birth of the Chinese Republic to the Japanese occupation - which marked the true development of the rice growing sector that lasted until the beginning of the 1940s. The author has the merit of emphasizing the centrality of the Society understood as «un tentativo di tradurre in termini concreti la dottrina corporativista di mediazione degli interessi tra le diverse nazioni che componevano il Manchukuo» (p. 92), while underlining its substantial failure.

Finally, the fourth and final chapter outlines a comparison between the branch of Majun, carefully studied in the second chapter, with three other branches of the Association. The Majun branch is in fact compared to the Tuqian branch, in the county of Yushu (Jilin) to the Xinkang branch

in Shuangcheng County (Binjiang) and finally to the Yulin branch in Jian County (Tonghua). From the comparison the link emerges between the individual interests of the farmers and membership of the Association, somehow debasing the ideal character. Dornetti writes: «Il fatto che fu proprio la sezione di Fushun, più facoltosa, a raggiungere un numero maggiore di iscritti, ci permette di riflettere sulla natura della partecipazione alla Kyōwakai da parte della popolazione mancese» (p. 114). The author sees the causes not in the «forza persuasiva dell'ideale panasiatico», but in the «potere di attrazione esercitato dagli incentivi materiali offerti dalle sezioni, sia nelle politiche assistenziali, che nella risoluzione di controversie» (p. 114). It is an important comparison which suggests a strong limit to the contours of the ideal and ideological space of most of the members of the Association, beyond the objectives of the Kyōwakai. It thus provides an essential element in understanding the history of Manchukuo.

Dornetti's text is evidently an interesting book for historians of both Manchukuo and of colonialism in China. As mentioned, the work is based on primary sources that have been studied by the author. Starting from a specific and limited case, the author provides us with a careful and precise analysis which can be a harbinger of further studies and reflections. The invitation that can be addressed to Dornetti is to broaden his research with further studies, perhaps starting from a translation into English of his book in order to make it accessible to a wider audience.