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978-0-521-08285-3 - Britain and East Asia, 1933-1937

Ann Trotter

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BRITAIN AND
EAST ASIA
1933—1937

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521204750

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First published 1975
This digitally printed version 2008

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 74-76581

ISBN 978-0-521-20475-0 hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-08285-3 paperback

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TO IAN H. NISH

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PREFACE

It is not surprising that, when the archives of the British Foreign Office for the thirties were opened in 1968, the attention of those interested in British policy in the far east should have first been focussed on the periods of high crisis – the Manchurian Incident (1931–3) and the Sino-Japanese war after 1937. These were the obvious bases from which to explore the assertions that the crisis in the far east in 1931 marked the true starting point of the second world war and that from 1937 there was an inevitable downhill course all the way to the Pacific war. Recent studies of the Manchurian crisis and of Britain and the Sino-Japanese war have changed our appreciation of the pre-war far eastern situation¹ but the years between 1933 and 1937 have remained a hazy and apparently featureless interval. This book seeks to throw some light on them. In fact, these superficially quiet years were marked by vigorous discussion of British policy in the far east and by attempts to direct this policy towards the maintenance of stability in this area. In particular, the British were concerned to find a way of keeping Japan in the ring of world powers and prepared to accept international restraints.

British interest in the far east was conceived to be based on British investment in China and the potential of the China market, and on the defence of the British empire in the far east and the Pacific. To the development of both the commercial and imperial aspects of this interest, the growing power of Japan was the challenger. On one level, British policy was China-centred, based on upholding the Nanking regime as the best hope for commercial expansion in China, on another, the conditions of the day made the state of Anglo-Japanese relations the key to the pursuit of a policy directed towards commercial expansion in China and the maintenance of naval limitation in the Pacific as the essential aspect of a viable imperial defence policy in the area.

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The British were faced by a conundrum. They believed there was room for Britain and Japan in China; they discussed various methods of improving Anglo-Japanese relations; but their search was for a formula which would leave British interests intact. British goodwill was their only bargaining counter. The publicity given to Japanese commercial competition, real and imagined, in other parts of the world was such as to prevent, in the mental climate associated with a world economic crisis, the granting of concessions by Britain to Japan in China or any other market. They were considered neither economically nor politically feasible. Similarly in naval matters, while the British believed adjustments might be possible for the sake of retaining something of the naval limitation agreements of Washington and London, American sensitivity to Japan's naval ambitions was felt to make concessions by Britain politically impossible. In British political circles and in Whitehall, there was evidence of considerable goodwill towards Japan but in reality no concrete way of improving Anglo-Japanese relations could be discovered and in practice British attempts to rehabilitate China only appeared to Japan as a challenge.

Part of the fascination of this period lies in the chronicling which it offers of Treasury influence on far eastern policy. The dual diplomacy which was characteristic of policy-making in which Neville Chamberlain, chancellor of the exchequer, and Sir Warren Fisher, permanent secretary to the Treasury, played an important role in putting pressure on the Foreign Office, helped to obscure the lines of British policy. It underlined the contradictions of a policy aimed at the cultivation of Chinese friendship and of Japanese goodwill and caused uncertainty in Tokyo. Nevertheless, until the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, the British tried with some success to keep the Japanese in play despite the unquestioned rivalry of Britain and Japan.

I am grateful to the Centre for International Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science for the financial assistance which made possible the completion of the research for and the writing of this study. I thank in particular Professors Geoffrey Goodwin and James Joll as chairmen of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-08285-3 - Britain and East Asia, 1933-1937

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the Centre for their support and interest. I also thank the committee of the British Federation of University Women for financial assistance granted through the City of London scholarship.

To Dr Ian Nish, Reader in International History at the London School of Economics, who gave generously of his scholarship, advice and guidance, I acknowledge my great debt and express my thanks. Mr E. W. Edwards of the University of Cardiff, Dr Richard Sims of the School of Oriental and African Studies and Professor Usui Katsumi of Kyushu University read the manuscript and I thank them for their helpful criticism and advice. I am grateful also for the interest of Professor W. G. Beasley of the School of Oriental and African Studies and of Captain Malcolm Kennedy. I thank Toshiko Tani, fellow of the Centre for International Studies, for her assistance with translation.

The archives of the Foreign Office and the Treasury form the basis of this study and I thank the staff of the Public Record Office in London for their invaluable assistance. I am grateful to Lord Simon for permission to use the Simon papers and to the China Association and the Manchester Chamber of Commerce for permission to use their papers. I thank the University of Birmingham library for the use of the Chamberlain papers, the University Library, Cambridge for the use of the Baldwin papers, the National Maritime museum for the use of the Chatfield papers, the National library in Canberra for the use of the Latham and Hughes papers and the War Memorial library in Canberra for the use of the Pearce papers.

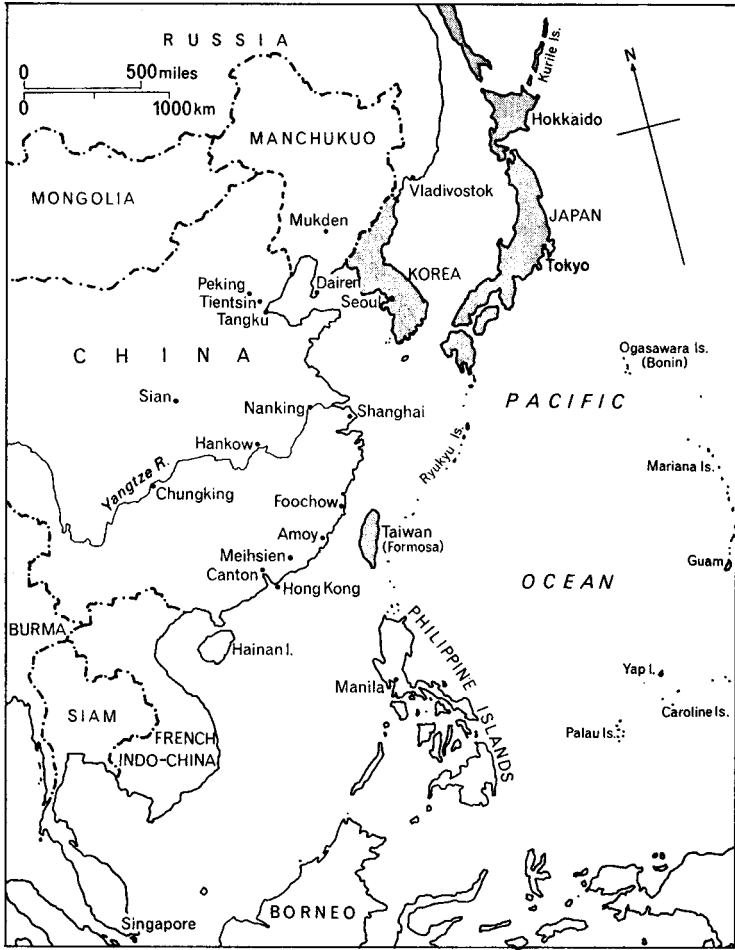
Finally, I thank the editorial staff of Cambridge University Press for their consideration and my friends in London for their moral support.

A. T.

London

November 1973

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