Carpe Diem?: The Manchurian-Mongolian Independence Movements, 1912–22

With the collapse of the Ch’ing dynasty in February 1912 and the subsequent power vacuum in Northeast Asia, Japan seemed poised to take a much greater role in Asia. Manchuria and Mongolia were prime areas for increased Japanese activity, and between 1912 and 1922, members of the various Japanese elites made numerous attempts to delineate a sphere of influence there for Japan, and to increase Japanese control. These disparate efforts were by no means coordinated, but together they do reveal a marked overlapping of goals among several powerful institutions and groups, even while opinions differed on how Japanese control could be increased.

The resolve of the Japanese military to increase its power in Mongolia is particularly evident, and circumstances were conducive to this project in the fluid conditions surrounding the end of both the Ch’ing and Tsarist empires, as well as the events of the First World War. One major result of the opportunities presented by these developments was Japanese military involvement in three separate movements to wrest Mongolia from Han Chinese control, in 1912, 1916 and 1918–22. Though these movements were abortive, Japanese participation in them indicates the lengths to which some military officers were prepared to go in an attempt to facilitate Japanese domination of the region. The Japanese Army officers involved were for the most part field officers and not especially senior, but considerable evidence suggests that their attempts were supported from above. Moreover, Robert Valliant noted in 1972 that in all three movements between 1912 and 1922 there was a consistency of purpose on the part of elements of the Japanese
military and the right wing, as well as continuity in Japanese personnel, both military and civilian. Valliant, however, overlooks several points of conflict over Mongolia among the Japanese elites, which will be discussed below.

An important feature of Japanese military activity in this period was the apparent willingness of the Army’s high command to turn a blind eye to the incidences of insubordination that occurred in connection with all three military operations in Mongolia. In each operation, there appears to have been high-level tolerance, approval or support of military action in the field that was designed to increase Japanese control of Mongolia, even when these field actions constituted clear instances of insubordination. Arguably, this high-level approval or tolerance of independent action set a pattern that was later exploited by the Kwantung Army in the assassination of Chang Tso-lin in 1928 and the Manchurian Incident of 1931.

From the numerous attempts to delineate Japan’s sphere of military influence or to increase direct Japanese control of the region in this period, it is clear that the supposed strategic importance of Mongolia to Japan was uppermost in the relationship, and had a distinct impact on Japanese-Mongolians ties. Not surprisingly, therefore, elements of the Japanese military and the right wing were in the ascendancy in the relationship between 1912 and 1922. Religious, academic and business groups did continue to seek closer ties with Mongolia, but their activities were largely overshadowed by the operations of the military and of right-wing activists.

Nevertheless, as in earlier periods, the relationship between Japan and Mongolia was a two-way affair in these years. Especially in the diplomatic arena, several overtures to Japan were made from the Mongolian side, suggesting, once more, that circumstances were fairly favourable to an increase in Japanese influence in the region. The various approaches during the period made by Mongolian individuals and groups seeking either diplomatic recognition or concrete aid from Japan no doubt further reinforced the perception among the Japanese elites of the validity of Japan’s claims to leadership within the region.

THE GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE ‘INDEPENDENCE’ MOVEMENTS

Throughout this period, Japanese-Mongolian relations were again strongly coloured by changes in Japan’s relations with both China and Russia. Sino-Japanese relations were profoundly affected by the collapse of the Ch’ing dynasty in February 1912 and the establishment of the Han Chinese republic, a development that cannot have been completely unexpected by the Japanese authorities. Prior to the downfall of the Ch’ing dynasty, some in the Japanese government and military had supported its overthrow by providing arms and financial assistance to