Introduction: Itō Takeo and the Research Work of the South Manchurian Railway Company

In November 1906, following the Russo-Japanese War, Japan acquired the South Manchurian Railway (SMR). Gotō Shimpei was named its first president and he immediately made plans for inaugurating a Research Department. “Research” was something Gotō considered utterly essential to colonial management. Tokutomi Sohō once said of Gotō: “Everyone has his own peculiarities. ‘Research’ is something that always hung close to Gotō like a briefcase.”¹ The Research Department began in April 1907 as a small agency and changed its name many times, at its height, around 1940, encompassing a total of 2,354 employees. It lasted for thirty-eight years, before the arrest of many of its main operatives by the Kwantung Army and Japan’s defeat in World War II spelled its demise. Who came to work for it and why? How did they see themselves? To what use was their research put, and what did they think about that? These are a few of the questions to be addressed in this introduction.

With Japan as the major force in Manchuria after 1906, Gotō Shimpei proceeded with his master plan for colonial development through research. The SMR received a huge quantity of capital, 200 million yen, half from the government and half in a public offering. It was never simply a for-profit company, for the SMR had a sense of immense responsibility, of mission. Among other things, Gotō wanted to be sure Manchuria never ceased to be under Japanese control, and that necessitated the immigration of 500,000 Japanese to the area.²

The slogan he devised for his conception of colonial control has been the object of considerable discussion: bunsō teki bubi, or “military preparedness in civil garb.” Itō records Gotō’s words on the subject:

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² Hara Kakuten, “Mantetsu chōsabu no rekishi to Ajia kenkyū” (A History of the Research Department of the SMR and Asian Studies), part 1, Ajia keizai 20, 4 (April 1979): 48, 60; and Yamada, Mantetsu chōsabu, pp. 12, 29–30.
In short, colonial policy is military preparedness in civil garb; it is carrying out the hegemon’s strategies under the flag of the kingly way. Such a colonial policy is inescapable in our time. What facilities, then, are necessary to see it through?

We have to implement a cultural invasion with a Central Laboratory, popular education for the resident populace, and forge other academic and economic links. Invasion may not be an agreeable expression, but [language] aside we can generally call our policy one of invasion in civil garb. . . . Certain scholars have said that the secret of administration lies in taking advantage of the people’s weaknesses. . . . Insofar as the secret to administration does hang on the weak points of mankind’s way of life and in fact has throughout history, it is that much more so with colonial policy.3

No mincing of words here. A main research office was established in Dairen, a branch in Tokyo for the first project in January 1908, and the East Asian Economic Investigation Bureau (EEB) later that year. Both the human and natural sciences were to be researched, and a massive network of facilities took form in Manchuria and later in China proper. Gotō had been trained as a medical doctor in Germany, and the methodical, clinical approach to research problems became a hallmark of SMR research.

Gotō asked Professor Okamatsu Santarō of Kyoto University, an expert in Chinese law, to head the Research Department. Okamatsu had led the team that researched the “old customs” of Taiwan when Gotō had been colonial civil governor there. But, Okamatsu had never run the kind of Research Department now envisioned for Manchuria, so Gotō sent him to Europe to study the operations of such an outfit. Manchuria was many, many times the size of Taiwan; it was not yet an outright colony of Japan; and the Research Department had not yet acquired the kind of staff needed for a comparable study of Manchuria. Nonetheless, Gotō regarded it as absolutely indispensable to colonial management to have detailed research on the “Old Customs of Manchuria,” for without this background knowledge, transforming and protecting the region would be difficult.4

4 There has been considerable scholarly criticism of the massive volumes that this research produced: Manshū kyūkan chōsa hōkoku (Report on the Investigation into the Old Customs of Manchuria), 9 vols. Nonetheless, this research did uncover lots of historical materials unknown or thought lost. See Hara, “Mantetsu chōsabu no rekishi,” part 3, Ajia keizai 20, 6 (June 1979): 58–68; and Yamada, Mantetsu chōsabu, p. 36. See also “Chūgoku kyūkan no chōsa ni tsuite: Amagai Kenzaburō shi o meguru zadankai” (On Research into the Old Customs of China: Roundtable Discussion with Amagai Kenzaburō), Tōyō bunka 25 (March