



China's Response to the Ethiopian Crisis (1935–1938)

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INTRODUCTION

The 1935–1937 war between Italy and Ethiopia, which culminated in the colonization of the latter, has been much studied by historians. Very little has been said, however, about its implications for Eastern Asian actors in the League of Nations. This chapter starts to fill the gap by looking at how China managed the opportunities and risks that the crisis presented. Central to its response was the need to navigate the tension that arose between the League's commitment to the pacific settlement of disputes and the territorial integrity of states on the one hand, and the pursuit of the narrower interests of the great powers on the other. The outcome was of great importance because China had been grappling with the same problem in the League since Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931, which is covered in the following section of this book.

With Ethiopia being so geographically distant from Eastern Asia there was more potential for China to maintain a good relationship with Italy than with Japan, despite Mussolini's expansionist foreign policy. Yet

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China's government and diplomats had to balance this priority against the need to maintain the credible commitment of the members of the League to the principles of the Covenant. This was complicated by a context in which public opinion was having a growing impact on foreign policy and the great powers were pre-occupied with avoiding another war in Europe. Although the diplomats ultimately failed to win all that they hoped for, their activities shed new light on how Eastern Asians used the League to shape international norms in ways that outlasted the life of the organization itself.

THE IMPACT OF THE ETHIOPIAN CRISIS ON CHINA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH ITALY

Maintaining a good relationship with Italy was important for China because it was one of the permanent members of the League Council, until its withdrawal from the organization on 11 December 1937. Moreover, the two countries had maintained relatively strong ties in the first half of the twentieth century. When they upgraded their legations to embassies in June 1934, Italy became the first Western country to establish an embassy in China. The military dimension to the relationship was increasingly important as China's government faced the challenges of fighting both Japan and the growing communist insurgency. This included an Air Mission sent by Prime Minister Benito Mussolini (1921–1943) to help the Nationalist government modernize its air force. Six naval officers from China's Ministry of the Navy were trained at l'Academie Navale de Livourne during 1935–1939, and nine more officers from the Guangdong local navy were dispatched to study at Regia Mario Italiana, in 1937. In early September 1935, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek (1887–1975) instructed H. H. Kung (1880–1967), his Minister of Finance, to purchase two to eight high-speed torpedo-boats, and demanded that they be secretly transported to the city of Hukou along the Yangzi River in Jiangxi province by the following February. Chiang also wanted to purchase 30 aerial torpedoes and 100 mines, which the Chinese ambassador to Italy, Liu Wendao (1893–1967), was entrusted to acquire within two months (CHCKS 2014: 682–683).

Such factors had to be taken into consideration when the Chinese government formulated its reaction to the request made to the League by Emperor Haile Selassie (1892–1975) for arbitration between his country and Italy, in early January 1935. The crisis had begun with the Walwal

Incident of December 1934, when skirmishes took place on the Ethiopian border between a detachment of the emperor's army and Somali troops in the service of Italy. Although the League tried hard to encourage arbitration and negotiation, it had little to show for its efforts after the first year. By July 1936, it had backtracked on its initial resolve to impose sanctions on Italy due to recognition that such an approach had little prospect of changing what had become the *de facto* occupation of Ethiopia.

A fuller analysis of the conflict and the actions of the League can be found elsewhere.¹ It is remarkable, however, that little attention has been paid to China's response or the links between the crises in Ethiopia and Manchuria. This could be due to an assumption that China lacked the power or motivation to play a significant role in a conflict from which it was geographically so far removed. Its diplomats did, however, keep close track of developments and frequently reported back to their Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). What their observations show is an awareness of how the immediate responses of other states to the crisis were driven not by a strong commitment to the League's principles of collective security and territorial integrity but by the strategic interests of the major powers.

The implications of the crisis for Japan were naturally highest in the minds of diplomats. This can be seen in a report submitted by Yang Jie (1889–1949), the Chinese ambassador to the Soviet Union, to the Nationalist government leader Chiang Kai-shek, which had been prepared by a Chinese Military Attaché, dated 22 March 1935. Noting that Japanese officers trained and commanded the Ethiopian army and provided it with weapons, he proposed that its interests in the country would be impaired by Italy's occupation. It was for this reason, he proposed, that Japan had twice lodged protests against Italy. On the other hand, the Japanese government had also suggested that if Italy would stop providing weapons to China, Tokyo would be more willing to negotiate with Rome on the Ethiopian question. From Yang's viewpoint, the Italian government would have to assess its interests in Africa before taking Japan's suggestion into consideration (CKSA 1935a).

The diplomatic correspondence also indicates the dilemma posed by China's need to maintain good relations with Italy. When the Italian ambassador to China, Vincenzo Lojacono, visited Chinese foreign minister, Wang Zhaoming, on 30 August, 1935, he made his government's case by stating that while it was determined to occupy Ethiopia it still hoped to contain the situation as a limited colonial war. If the League Council authorized Britain to take military sanctions against Italy

when it met the following month, he warned, it would risk expanding the conflict into a European war. As such, Lojacono expected the Chinese representatives to the League to support Italy, or at least not to oppose it. Considering the possible consequences, Wang claimed that China would not give approval to the aggression made by Italy, but also stated that mutual amity between two countries should be promoted. He thus requested the Chinese representatives to the League, Yan Huiqing (1877–1950) and Quo Tai-chi (1890–1952), to ‘remain silent’ on the Ethiopia question. If the discussion reached the stage when voting was needed, the representatives were supposed to ask for further instructions from the MOFA (CKSA 1935b). Chiang Kai-shek approved what Wang suggested (CKSA 1935b).

China’s position on the sanctions issue was also influenced to a large degree by a reluctance to alienate the other great powers on the Council. The embassy in London was aware that the British government was trying to find ways to stop the Ethiopia question from undermining its own relationship with Italy and driving it into a closer alignment with Germany. It thus reported to Chiang Kai-shek in June 1935 that Anthony Eden (1897–1977), minister for the League of Nations and soon to be British foreign secretary, had met Mussolini in Rome and told him that his government was prepared to give its colonized territory near Ethiopia to Italy so as to reduce the tensions. Mussolini had refused to accept the offer, however (CKSA 1935c).

Chiang Kai-shek’s personal documents of September to October 1936 reveal a high degree of concern over the prospects for war. Sometimes, he was uncertain whether it would break out, while at other times he was optimistic that France might help to calm the turbulence. Some indication of how he had to balance the priorities of maintaining a good relationship with Italy and maintaining the League’s principles can be seen from an entry dated 26 September, where he turns his attention to China’s procurement of six Italian heavy-bombers, which should have been transported three months earlier (CHCKS Vol. 4: 691). He writes, ‘It is not good timing to request the Italian government for the follow-up of the procurement at this critical stage. But in contrast to the Italo-Abyssinian [Ethiopian] crisis, the situation in East Asia has a ten-fold impact on our country. In view of this fact, I have to push it’ (SLGB 2008: 467–468).

Chiang did not completely discount the possibility that China could play a positive role. In a diary entry for 2 October, he records that H. H. Kung had suggested that he should use his personal friendship with

Mussolini to persuade him to settle the dispute peacefully. Although he did not think this would work, he thought it would be a good idea if Liu Wendao could at least try to catch Mussolini's intention (CKSD 02-10-35). Chiang's preference for a peaceful resolution was no doubt influenced by the need to maintain diplomatic pressure against Japan's use of force in Manchuria, but his diaries also show that it was coloured by a personal sense of morality. In response to the launching of an attack by Italy on Ethiopia on 3 October, 1935, for example, he borrowed from Confucius to write, 'The person [Italy] who initiated evil actions would probably have no posterity'. Despite this, and his expectations for an early ceasefire, Chiang could still compliment Mussolini by writing, 'His adventurous spirit really makes him a powerful and strong man' (CKSD 1935a).

The conflict deepened, however, when Italian troops crossed the Ethiopian border. On 7 October an investigative committee established by the League Council submitted a report which found Italy to be in breach of Article 12 of the Covenant, making it appropriate to take action under Article 16. On 10 October, the Assembly voted to constitute a Committee of Coordination, tasked with applying a range of sanctions. Shortly before the vote, Wang Zhaoming pointed out to Chiang that China had to support economic sanctions, but that this would not harm Sino-Italian relations because both the League and Italy knew what the voting would bring, to which Chiang agreed. Liu Wendao also suggested to the MOFA that China should cast its vote in support of the measures. By the following year, their view was borne out as the League proceeded to discuss revocation of the sanctions it had tried to impose.

The turning point had come when Italy presented the League with a *fait accompli* by proclaiming its sovereignty over Ethiopia and installing King Vittorio Emanuele III (1869–1947) as the Emperor of Ethiopia on 9 May, 1936. When the Council recognized this *de facto* situation and called for the Assembly to vote on whether to maintain the sanctions issue, Lojacono asked China's MOFA to instruct its representative to vote in favour of revocation. China's Executive Yuan (cabinet) accordingly resolved that: 'The Ministry of Foreign Affairs instruct the Chinese representatives to vote for revoking sanctions on Italy' (NGA 1936). China thus became one of 44 countries to vote in support of the motion to revoke when the Assembly met on 5 July, and the sanctions were lifted ten days later. This did not stop Italy from forging a closer relationship with Germany, however, which had just violated the 1925 Pact of Locarno by

sending its troops into the Rhineland in March, putting the two countries on course to eventually become allies outside the League.

MANAGING PUBLIC OPINION: A CONTROVERSIAL DOCUMENTARY

The Chinese government also had to learn how to balance the concerns of high diplomacy with the increasing importance of public opinion in foreign policy. A good example of this is an incident that arose when a Russian documentary film, *Abyssinia*, was shown at the Isis Cinema in Shanghai shortly after the Italian invasion, leading to a serious disturbance that created several months of friction between China, Italy, and Russia. Produced by the Soyuzkino Production Company and directed by Vladimir Yeshuria and Boris Zeitlin, this documentary consisted of two parts. The first introduced the environmental features and social aspects that characterize Ethiopia, including its natural resources of gold, silver and coals mines, oil fields, military terrain, and the hardship of the peasants. The second part was a newsreel about the war in 1934.

As far as Italy was concerned, it was appropriate for its embassy to protest about the showing of any films deemed to be offensive to the nation and its people, including some American-made films which tended to criticize the Fascist regime or poke fun at Italian stereotypes. Before such movies were released in China, especially in Shanghai, the Italian Embassy would request censorship and China's MOFA would refer the cases to the National Motion Picture Censorship Committee (NMPCC) for further discussion. Sometimes the country of the production company would request its embassy to help in solving any related problems.

On 21 January, 1937, Ferrajolo, a secretary at the Italian Embassy in China, reported to the Chinese MOFA that the showing of an anti-Fascist film like *Abyssinia* might trigger unpleasant reactions because a number of Italian seamen had disembarked at the port. In view of this, the MOFA suggested that Mayor Wu Guozhen (1903–1984) of the Shanghai Municipal government should temporarily suspend the showing. At 3 pm on 22 January, some armed policemen, led by a police inspector, went to the Isis to try to order the staff to not show the film and refund the tickets. Some members of the audience protested that this was completely unjustifiable because a permit had been granted to show the film on 15 January (AH 1937a: 95).

The Italian Embassy was satisfied with the Shanghai Municipal government's quick response and expected the film to be banned from any further showing in Shanghai or elsewhere in China because 'it is inadmissible that a third Country may do propaganda hostile to a nation friendly to China within the territory of the Republic' (AH 1937b: 92-94). Since the movie was a Russian production, two Russian employees working in the Isis passed this information on to their embassy, which soon lodged a strong protest to the MOFA in a memorandum of 3 February (AH 1937c: 105m).

The NMPCC thus decided to re-examine the film and on 8 February, Hsu Mo and Chen Jie, vice-ministers of the MOFA, and Fang Zhi, Director of the Central Propaganda Department, were invited for a discussion. It was then decided that the following contents should be removed: (1) Chinese subtitles concerning the Italian invasion of the colony; (2) the voice-over of the Italian aerial attack on Ethiopia; (3) narratives about Ethiopia made by a Russian News photographer; (4) clips of Italian aeroplanes being shot down and seven people getting injured; (5) the footage of Italians using poison gas; (6) the footage of a bombing of the Red Cross; (7) the voice-over of the Italian occupation of the capital of Ethiopia. After the offending elements were removed as requested, the Isis received a two-day permit to screen the film, but only three times a day. Despite these compromises, however, the Italian Embassy was still not satisfied and again warned about an upcoming disturbance (AH 1937d: 17).

The incident duly occurred when *Abysinia* was shown on 20 February. According to a report produced by the Isis, during the afternoon screening of the film about 30 to 40 seamen from Italian warship Lepanto had been seated in the hall with about 100 people in plain clothes. At about 3:45 pm the mariners started to smash up the facilities and some broke into the projector room to damage the projector and several films. The Russian manager, David I. Abromovich, and a Russian member of staff, Dimitri Kirichenko, were injured. Four Chinese policemen on the scene merely stood and watched, when an investigation by the Shanghai police confirmed the contents of the cinema's report, it concluded that the riot had been directed by staff in the Italian consulate (AH 1937e: 33).

Immediately after the incident, the Shanghai Municipal government addressed a protest to the Italian consulate general (AH 1937f: 31). On the morning of 22 February, the Italian chargé d'affaires, Desandre, went

to see Minister Wang at the MOFA where he complained that *Abyssinia* was nothing more than communist propaganda aimed at defaming Fascism, Italy, and the Italian army. According to him, it was howls of mocking laughter from the Chinese audience that had upset and irritated the disciplined Italian seamen, leading to their relatively aggressive response. Minister Wang expressed his disappointment that a diplomat could take sides like this to cover up an act of deviance that had been committed by his countrymen (AH 1937g: 48, 50). An official letter of protest from the MOFA to the Italian Embassy held that the riot was intentionally planned and that the Italian Embassy had not taken any steps to prevent it beforehand. It urged the embassy to have the perpetrators punished, to ensure that the film was returned to the cinema, and to see that compensation was paid for the losses incurred (AH 1937h: 126). The Russian consulate expressed similar expectations and decided to wait for the results (AH 1937i: 69).

In order to close the case as early as possible, the MOFA instructed Liu Wendao to negotiate with the Italian foreign ministry. However, the negotiations did not go as anticipated because Italy refused to deal with the aftermath of the riot and the ministry continued to insist that *Abyssinia* was an anti-Italian film. In response to the specific requests of the Chinese MOFA, it claimed that the film had been damaged beyond repair in the riot, that despite its concern for the injured no substantial compensation could be offered, and that the perpetrators had evaded capture (AH 1937j: 840). In fact, the Italian Foreign Ministry had no intention to negotiate with the Chinese ambassador and instructed its diplomats in Nanjing to respond to the Chinese MOFA instead. It made clear to its embassy that the acceptance of the following prerequisites was essential for any resolution: provision of evidence of the violence caused by the perpetrators; that the return of the already damaged film was out of the question; and that the compensation of 92,791 Chinese yuan requested by the Isis was completely unacceptable, although 20,000 yuan could be provided as compensation to the injured staff. Despite three months of discussion the negotiations remained deadlocked. When Rome got to know that the two injured staff were Russians it refused to pay any compensation at all (AH 1937k: 177).

THE EXCHANGE OF RECOGNITION BETWEEN ITALY AND JAPAN

That the Ethiopian crisis and Japan's invasion of Manchuria both posed a test of the principles embedded in the Covenant posed a particularly thorny question for the Chinese government. As discussed in the following section of this book, the failure of the League to punish Japan after the Lytton Commission had decided that it was the aggressor in Manchuria had become a burning issue in the Chinese press. The pressure on the government to take a stance on the issue only grew further, however, when Italy's request for recognition of its annexation of Ethiopia gave it a common cause with Japan's search for support for recognition of its puppet-state of Manchukuo.

China's MOFA first heard about the possibility of a mutual recognition agreement between Italy and Japan in mid-November 1936. It ordered its embassy to Rome to clarify the situation and ambassador Liu Wendao duly reported back that the Italian foreign minister had confirmed that the Japanese Embassy had proposed mutual recognition two months earlier, but that Italy had not responded (AH 1936a: 1).

Even so, deeply concerned about the recognition exchange proposal, the MOFA ordered its embassy to Tokyo to follow how the relationship between the two countries was developing. Its subsequent report, dated 17 November, includes an analysis of the situation written by an influential Japanese critic which points out that if Italy did recognize Manchukuo, it would incur the dissatisfaction of the Chinese and that Italy would have to sacrifice the benefits it gained from its trade with the country. It also emphasized that since Manchukuo was economically blocked from access to international trade, there was no need for Italy to grant it recognition (AH 1936b: 4).

However, the Chinese Embassy to Rome also found that its Japanese counterpart had taken substantive actions to promote the exchange of recognition. The Italian foreign office admitted that it was negotiating with the Japanese ambassador and there was a possibility that the Italian consulate at the city of Harbin, in Manchukuo, would be moved to Fengtian, that would leave it no longer subordinate to either Italy's Embassy in either Japan or China, but directly to the foreign ministry in Italy (AH 1936c: 21). Victor Hoo Chi-tsai (1894–1972), a Chinese delegate to the League, read from the press that Italy would soon recognize Manchukuo

and was eager to learn more about the attitude of the Chinese government to such a development. He suggested that if China decided to make a formal complaint against Italy's recognition of Manchukuo, it should also lodge a protest with the League and distribute copies of the text to all its members (AH 1936d: 22).

The Italian ambassador to China, Vincenzo Lojacono, called on foreign minister, Chang Chun (1889–1990), on 30 November 1936, to try to explain the situation. He stressed that Italy had indeed been informed by Japan that the Manchukuo government had agreed to have the Italian consulate general set up in the city of Shenyang, but that this was only an oral agreement with no official record. He then added that Italy also wanted to set up an observation post on the Eastern Soviet border to conduct business transactions with China and guard against the spread of communism. As a result, it was Italy's intention to continue cooperation with China. When Chang repeated his question about Italy's intentions regarding recognition of Manchukuo, Lojacono emphasized that the consulate general did not have official diplomatic status and that it was not located in Manchukuo's capital of Xinjing (Changchun), which indicated an attitude of non-recognition. In response, Chang said that China would make an immediate announcement that Italy had no intention to recognize Manchukuo. Upon hearing this, Lojacono appeared to be reluctant and said that he had to confirm with Rome (AH 1936c: 25). The MOFA, however, was concerned that such assurances that Italy would not recognize Manchukuo at the legal level were belied by its intention to set up the consulate general in Shenyang. Lojacono then expressed his personal views regarding the issue, pointing out that Italy was not going to join the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany and Japan. Although it shared Germany's anti-communist stance, there was no intention to take any concrete actions to sign a pact with Japan like that which had been made between Germany and Japan (AH 1936f: 25).

After this meeting, the MOFA immediately assigned Liu Wendao to visit the Italian Foreign Minister, Galeazzo Ciano, to confirm details regarding the move of the Italian consulate general. Liu wanted had to make sure whether the Italian government had recognized Manchukuo or was preparing to do so (AH 1936c). As soon as he received the instruction, he paid a visit to Ciano on 30 November, who explained that locating the consulate general in Manchukuo was only following the steps taken by other countries. Explaining that Italy had no intention to recognize Manchukuo, he emphasized that developing its relations with Japan

would not be at the cost of its friendship with China. As for the conflicts between China and Japan, he said that Italy would like to negotiate in China's favour given that Italy and Japan enjoyed good diplomatic relations (AH 1936g: 27). The next day, Liu reported to the MOFA about his visit to Ciano and suggested making public Ciano's statements that 'Italy had no intention to recognize Manchukuo' and 'Italy's friendship with China would not be at the cost of its relations with Japan' and that the import of his words should be emphasized in the press. With Ciano's statements announced to the public, the Italian government would find it harder to explain itself to the international community if it contradicted the assurances it had given to China (AH 1936h: 27).

After this, relatively, positive news was received from Ciano, however, the MOFA obtained information from the General Staff Headquarters that the Japanese ambassador to Italy, Sugimura Yōtarō, together with his secretary, Watanabe, and military Attaché, Numuta, had already had secret contacts with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Division of Eastern Affairs, and Department of Military and Political Affairs. The topics for negotiation had included Japan's recognition of Italy's annexation of Ethiopia in exchange for Italy's recognition of Manchukuo, and a commitment by Japan, Germany and Italy to cooperate in fighting against Communism and the Soviet Union, with Japan serving as the military police force of the East. It had then been decided that Japan would go ahead and recognize Italian sovereignty over Ethiopia, that an agreement to set up the Italian consulate in Shenyang would be announced imminently, and that the two states would join with Germany in a tripartite cooperation to oppose communism and the Soviet Union. To help take this plan forward, the deputy dean of the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente in Italy, Jucee, would be assigned to visit Japan under the pretext of delivering lectures (AH 1936i: 38). When Jucee had left Rome on 23 October and taken a tour by ship to arrive in Japan on 2 November, ambassador Sugimura had gone to the station in Rome to see him off. The intelligence also indicated that Jucee was accompanied by staff from the Japanese Embassy. Moreover, on 11 November, Numuta had taken the ship, Sengen Muru, back to Japan (AH 1936i: 38).

Considering this information to be 'vital to the future of our country', the General Staff Headquarters called it to the special attention of the MOFA. But the ministry only responded by instructing the Chinese Embassy to Japan to keep close track of what Jucee was doing (AH 1936j: 38–41). The ensuing report to the MOFA indicated that he had made

contacts with scholars in Tokyo and delivered several academic speeches, but it was unclear whether he was engaged in any political activities (AH 1936k: 42–43).

Then came the information in a news report of 28 November that the spokesman of the Japanese foreign ministry had confirmed to foreign correspondents in Tokyo that Japan would sign an important agreement with Italy. The MOFA was greatly concerned about the contents of any such agreement, especially anything related to an exchange of recognition (AH 1936l: 26). Two days later, it was reported by a news agency that Rome had announced that Italy and Japan had in fact signed an agreement confirming mutual recognition of Manchukuo and the annexation of Ethiopia. The MOFA was very confused by these conflicting pieces of information (AH 1936m: 27). Ciano, after all, had explained to Liu that setting up a consulate in Manchukuo was just following the example set by other countries and did not mean that Italy would recognize Manchukuo. He had also stressed that Italy had informed Japan many times that his country would never sacrifice its friendship with China for the purpose of improving its amicable relationship with Japan (AH 1936n: 40).

China was not alone in being worried about these developments. Reports in the press in March 1937 that the Italian government would consent to the establishment of a Manchukuo consulate office in Italy triggered serious concern on the part of France. On March 11, the French ambassador to China, Paul Naggiar, thus met with foreign minister Wang Chonghui to express their mutual concerns regarding the recognition issue. Naggiar pointed out that two French consulates had been stationed in Shenyang and Harbin, respectively, before the founding of Manchukuo and that the two consuls stationed there had been appointed for 12 years. The appointment of new consuls or the issuing of consul exequaturs by Japan to recognize their legal status would mean that Manchukuo had gained *de facto* recognition from France. Due to these considerations, Naggiar explained, the French government would not appoint new consuls. Wang expressed his affirmation of the decision made by the French government and emphasized that, based on the resolutions of the League of Nations, member nations should grant neither *de jure* nor *de facto* recognition to Manchukuo. He maintained that consuls located in Manchuria were only supposed to interact with local government officials on general affairs that were not relevant to political relations. He also speculated that Italy had probably only consented to the establishment

of its Manchukuo consulate because Japan had agreed to downgrade its embassy in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa to a consulate, indicating its stance on the Italian invasion of that country (AH 1937a: 66–68).

When Naggiar met Wang for a further discussion, on 26 March, however, he announced that the exequatur that the Italian consul in Shenyang had received was issued in the name of Aisin Gioro Puyi, Japan's puppet emperor, which meant that Italy had formally recognized Manchukuo. Under such a circumstance, France could in fact follow Italy and grant recognition to Manchukuo, regardless of the League's resolution to the contrary. Naggiar also claimed that he found it quite incomprehensible that a former Italian minister of finance had been invited to be an advisor to the Chinese government. Vice-minister Xu responded by explaining that his government would try to maintain relations with Italy, but not sacrifice China's interests for the sake of keeping that friendly relationship (AH 1937b: 63–64).

When Italy and Japan finally signed their joint recognition agreement on 1 June, the Italian foreign ministry claimed that it was limited to economic affairs and unrelated to politics. In July, however, Japan launched its all-out invasion of China, and on 29 November, Italy announced its recognition of Manchukuo and the establishment of an embassy in its capital, Xinjing (Changchun). China's MOFA responded by lodging a protest with Ciano (AH 1937c: 48).

These developments came as no surprise to Wellington Koo, China's ambassador to Paris.² Drawing on experience of the League that went back as far as the Paris Peace Conference and through working with the Lytton Commission on Manchuria, his view was that Italy's recognition of Manchukuo was not beyond prediction. He further pointed out how 'the Italian government showed its support for the non-recognition principle in the League Assembly but then took an opposite stance', which left the MOFA no choice but to send a memorandum of protest to Rome, the full text of which was also delivered to the members of the League. On 3 December, the Italian consulting Team in the National Aviation Committee was dismissed by the Chinese government and ambassador Liu was recalled from Italy by Chiang Kai-shek in January 1938. A breach of diplomatic relations between China and Italy was imminent (AH 1937d: 56).

BRITAIN'S NOTE ON RECOGNIZING ITALY'S ANNEXATION

China's dilemma had thus become acute. Its appeal to the League against the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and the establishment of the puppet-state of Manchukuo the following year had been successful insofar as it had led the organization to reaffirm the non-recognition principle, even though it was disappointed by the failure to impose sanctions on Japan. When the League had dealt with the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, China had hoped to strengthen its own position by supporting the Assembly's resolutions on non-recognition and imposing sanctions against the aggressor, albeit knowing that the measures would prove to be so ineffective that no substantial harm would be done to its relationship with Italy. The developments in the relationship between Italy and Japan that followed soon proved to be at China's cost, however.

Equally concerning was that the manoeuvring of the great powers outside the League over the status of Ethiopia threatened to further undermine the credibility of the non-recognition principle. Most important was a change of attitude by the British government, which signalled a move towards recognition of Italy's control over Ethiopia. This was part of the broader policy of appeasement, designed to prevent the strengthening of Italy's alignment with Hitler's Germany and avoid another war in Europe. It began to become apparent in April 1938, when, after signing an agreement with Germany, Britain requested the discussion of Ethiopia be put on the Council agenda for the 9 May. Faced with a possible challenge to the resolutions that had earlier been made by the Assembly, China was torn between standing firmly in support of the non-recognition position on the one hand and maintaining its alliance with Britain on the other (AH 1938a: 5).

Mired in indecision, China consulted other states. When its ambassador to the United States, C.T. Wang, sought a meeting with Cordell Hull, however, he was told that the secretary of state was away on holiday. His under-secretary merely conveyed the message that he 'regrets u[i]nability to advise on question on political nature pertaining to Chinese government but adds China should know what is best to protect her own interest' (AH 1938b: 31).

The responses from members of the League were obviously determined by their own various interests. Sweden was undecided as to whether to vote for recognition as proposed by Britain but said that it would follow the majority opinion rather than acting alone in such a case (AH 1938c:

17). Iran said it would act in concert with other small states if they had a unanimous stance when it came to a vote. If the small states were divided and the bigger ones reached an agreement on Britain's proposal, then it would go with their decision. In other words, Iran would only make its final decision when the Council met in Geneva (AH 1938d: 24).

Maxim Litvinov, the People's Commissar of Foreign affairs for the Soviet Union, responded that his government had no objection to the British note but added that Ethiopia was entitled to claim the right to a seat at the Council session. He pointed out that France had agreed to the British proposal and that Britain might not even put it to a vote. He explained that this procedure would have serious implications for dealing with the Manchurian question, so China might find it necessary to make a statement in order not to compromise herself on a matter of principle. The Soviet government, he maintained, would not oppose if it did this (AH 1938e: 20–21). Support for a vote was more forthcoming for the Northern European states. Brazil, however, merely circumvented all procedural niceties by recognizing the King of Italy as the Emperor of Ethiopia on 24 April (AH 1938f: 29).

When the Chinese ambassador to London, Quo Tai-chi, made further inquiries about the contents of the British note, he soon came to learn that it proposed giving every state the freedom to make its own decision as to whether to recognize the Italian annexation. In this regard, while Quo knew that Anglo-Chinese relations were important, he also felt that gaining US sympathy was equally important and that the opinions of public advocates of world peace should also be seriously considered, being concerned that the fate of the non-recognition principle would play a vital role pertaining to the future of Manchuria as well as other Japanese occupied territories in China. In view of these facts, he felt that China should stick to her principled stance (AH 1938g: 18–19). He gained support for this stance from Sun Fo (1881–1973), the son of Sun Yat-sen and the President of China's Legislative Yuan (parliament), who was visiting Europe at that time (AH 1938h: 23).

When Quo met the deputy Under-Secretary of the British foreign ministry, Alexander Cadogan, on the evening of 27 April, he let him know that the note was a big blow to the prestige of the League. As far as the Sino-Japanese conflict was concerned, Quo suggested that one way to appease criticism and maintain the mutual interests of Britain and his own country would be for the Assembly and the Council to propose a resolution to grant a loan to China. If France would not get involved in

a discussion of the loan, it would look even better for Britain to promote such a proposal (AH 1938i: 32–33). Anthony Eden, the British foreign secretary, expressed his agreement | (AH 1938j: 41–42).

What concerned China most at this stage, however, was whether it was possible to discuss the Sino-Japanese question before the Ethiopian question was raised. Victor Hoo Chi-tsai was thus told to keep his attention on the situation at the League (AH 1938k: 48). At noon on 9 May, 1938, Anthony Eden and Wellington Koo had a discussion in Geneva in which Koo insisted that China's proposal should be discussed early in the discussion to ensure that a concrete plan would be agreed for its requested loan and that an offer of financial for its military resistance against Japan would be forthcoming (AH 1938l: 53–54).

When the Council met for a closed-door meeting on 9 May, it was agreed that the Ethiopian representative could be invited to speak to the body (AH 1938l: 55). The following day Lord Halifax presented a statement to the Council which explained that the motive for Britain's agreement with Italy was to reduce tension between the two states and establish the conditions for stability from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean, which was received enthusiastically by the other members. The only exception was Litvinov, who welcomed the agreement but added that dealing with bilateral pacts also had to take into consideration relations between the two parties concerned and the rest of the world. He then made a clear allusion to the on-going Sino-Japanese war, stating, 'We have to take into consideration the effect which such agreements may have on those problems which are still before the League of Nations and still remain to be dealt with' (*OJ* 1938, May–June: 306).

This was followed by a long appeal from Wellington Koo, who proceeded to spell out how the Council had failed to address the issues that China had raised concerning Japan's aggression in its previous meetings. Noting that 'a wave of so-called realism is sweeping over the West', he argued that the facts deserved attention and a call for action 'not alone in China's interest, but also for the cause of international law and order and the well-being of humanity' (*OJ* 1938, May–June: 306–308). The following morning Koo made another speech and in the afternoon proposed that a discussion of the Sino-Japanese question should be held the next day. When the British and Soviet representatives said that they were not ready for such a discussion, however, the chairman decided to leave the final discussion of the British note until 13 May.

At the Council meeting on 12 May, at which Emperor Haile Selassie was present in person, Lord Halifax opened with a statement that revealed some of the serious implications that arose from the decision to recognize Italy's sovereignty over his Ethiopia. Britain's decision, he explained, reflected his government's opinion that the steps already taken by the League in the course of the Ethiopian dispute could not be held to constitute any binding obligation on the member states to withhold recognition until a unanimous decision had been made. Given the freedom of action that this allowed, it was reasonable to recognize that the Italian government had obtained control over virtually all of the former territory of Ethiopia, and that '...there is no organized native authority and no central native administration with the slightest prospect of reconquering the country'. Looking at the broader ramifications of this decision for international order, he accepted that it would have implications for the dispute over Manchuria, but explained that '...when, as here, two ideals are in conflict – on the one hand, the ideal of devotion, unflinching but unpractical, to some high purpose; on the other, the ideal of practical victory for peace – I cannot doubt that the stronger claim is that of peace' (*OJ 1938*, May–June: 334–335).

The following day, the Council members again expressed their support for the British position, with the Polish representative, M. Komarnicki, going so far as to explicitly state that, 'if the League continues to confine itself to rigid procedure, serving only to perpetuate sources of conflict – as was the case, for instance, in the "Manchukuo" affair – it is to be feared that its role as an organ of international cooperation will inevitably be diminished' (*OJ 1938*, May–June: 343).

This was challenged by Wellington Koo when it came to his turn to speak. Appealing to the delegates to not so readily put the facts on the ground above the principles of the Covenant, he explained that his government attached the greatest importance to those principles. Focusing on the non-recognition principle, he explained that this was '...not only because of recent and current developments in the Far East and of its desire to see peace and security re-established in that region on the basis of law, treaty and justice, but also because of the general interests of peace and the welfare of the whole world'. The Chinese government, he concluded, would not be able to subscribe to the British position (*OJ 1938*, May–June: 344–345).

On that day, nine of the 15 members of the Council spoke in favour of allowing individual states the freedom to decide whether or not to

recognize Italy's sovereignty over Ethiopia. Only China and New Zealand supported the representative of Haile Selassie in speaking against the British position (*OJ* 1938, May–June: 346). The president then declared that the discussion was closed with a clear majority in favour of the principle that each country should be free to determine its own attitude in the light of their own situation and obligations. In a somewhat confused attempt to square this with the core principles of the Covenant, he added that the decision should not be interpreted as amounting to a pronouncement on questions of principle or the retraction of past judgements, or any line of future conduct that should be binding on members. When the decision was submitted to the Assembly China joined with the small minority of just the Soviet Union, New Zealand and Bolivia to insist on non-recognition of the Italian annexation.

CONCLUSION

The above analysis reveals much about the distinctive role that China played as one of the three Eastern Asian states in the League. Like Siam, it had good reasons to try to adopt a passive stance that would minimize the dangers of entanglement in disputes between the big powers. During the ten years of the Nanjing Decade (1928–1937), the priority of the government was to make great efforts in national reconstruction. This required emphasizing good relations with the European countries and the United States. Italy was important as a permanent member of the League Council and a source of substantial assistance for the nation-building project.

The possibilities for pursuing this strategy were always limited by the struggle with Japan over Manchuria, however. Because Italy's attack on Ethiopia had serious implications for how the League dealt with that problem, China's room for manoeuvre was increasingly constrained. At the heart of its dilemma was the need to uphold the commitment of the League to its stated principle of inviolable state sovereignty when this impinged on the foreign policies of the most powerful states. Whereas China's relationship with Japan had deteriorated to the point where it had little to lose by lodging an appeal for arbitration in the case of Manchuria, it enjoyed good relations with Italy when it launched its attack on Ethiopia. Maintaining this situation was made more complicated as public opinion began to have a greater impact on foreign policy, as shown by the embarrassment over the showing of the film, *Abyssinia*.

Comparisons with Japan's role in the League are, of course, even more limited because the two states played the very different roles of victim and aggressor. By going below the level of the state, however, Shinohara's chapter raises some interesting questions about how even Japan's international-minded diplomats attempted to play a positive role in promoting the ideals of the League, although they were doomed to failure by the rise of militarism in their own government and society. China's sub-state actors might have been more successful in this respect. Chiang Kai-shek, for example, was a military figure whose attachment to the Confucian values of justice and righteousness was compatible with the League's commitment to the pacific resolution of international disputes. Moreover, even though China was a relatively weak state that lacked sufficiently well-trained soldiers and the advanced equipment needed to resist invasion, the League did provide a platform for diplomats like Wellington Koo to join with the representatives of other victims of aggression, such as Ethiopia, to try to articulate and consolidate the League's core values.

Given this limited power, China's refusal to support Britain's proposal on recognizing the Italian annexation of Ethiopia should be recognized as significant for several reasons. In the short term, its diplomats could use the dispute to help build the case for humanitarian aid and economic and moral support from the League in their country's war against Japan. In the longer-term, their direct experience of the shortcomings of the League put them in a good position to help to shape a better understanding of the tensions between international governance and the imperative for states to pursue their own interests. It is no accident that some, like their Japanese counterparts, would bring this to bear on the work of rebuilding international organisations after World War Two. Quo Tai-chi, for example, served as China's representative on the UN Security Council for a brief period in 1947. Victor Hoo Chi-tsai was appointed assistant Secretary General in 1946 and served in various positions before the Republic of China gave up its seat to the People's Republic of China in 1971.

Best known is Wellington Koo, who was a founding delegate to the UN, served as ambassador to the United States and became a judge at the International Court of Justice in 1956, serving for three years as its vice president. The understanding of the Chinese actors that collective security could not depend on idealism alone but could only be implemented with the support and determination of the most powerful states is summed up

well by a speech that he delivered at the Academy of Diplomacy in Paris in December, 1937, in which he asserted his belief that:

A most effective triangle in defence of liberty and peace would be that of Great Britain, the United States and France. United by a community of ideals and blessed with unlimited resources of military and economic power at their disposal...they will prove to be an anchor-sheet in the present stormy world. (Koo 1937)

Koo and his colleagues were all too aware at that time that the most powerful states had failed to play this role when it came to applying the principles of the League to the cases of Ethiopia and Manchuria. The jury is still out on whether they are more willing and able to do so in the twenty-first century.

NOTES

1. For a concise but detailed account of the actions of the Council and Assembly see Spencer (1937). For a survey of great power diplomacy towards the Abyssinian question see Baer (1976).
2. For more on Wellington Koo and his background see the chapter by Hughes in this volume.

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Picture of the Lytton Commission, the Earl of Lytton (front row left), and Wellington Koo (right) (*Source* United Nations Archives at Geneva)