

<BOOK REVIEW>Resource Review : Brill Asian
Studies Primary Source Database

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RESOURCE REVIEW

Brill Asian Studies Primary Source Database

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The Brill Asian Studies Primary Source Database is a collection of English-language materials, primarily English-language newspapers published in Japan and Asia from the late nineteenth century through to the 1950s. Newspapers are “the first draft of history”; they constitute a vital record of our times, and leave traces in our collective memories. In recent years, newspapers and magazines have become available to many researchers in reprints, microfilms, and databases. The database under review here is an important element in a growing body of such historical material. Its value to the researcher is enhanced by cross-referencing and its comparison of multiple sources.

Of the English-language newspapers published in modern Japan, *The Japan Times* (1897–), and *The Japan Advertiser* (1913–1940) are the best known, and both can be accessed in *The Japan Times Archives* database.¹ Digital versions of *The Independent* (1896–1899) and *The Korea Daily News* (1896–1989), both published in Korea under Japanese rule, have also been digitized. However, the collection under review here contains nine other important English-language newspapers, as well as magazines, yearbooks, and pamphlets in English. Together they constitute a very rare and interesting resource for scholars and students of Japan and Asian studies.

The most important of these is *The Japan Chronicle* (1900–1940). This newspaper was founded in Kobe by Robert Young (1858–1922), a Londoner with Scottish roots. Although Japan’s first English-language newspaper was published in Nagasaki in 1861, Yokohama and Kobe became the two centers for foreign-language newspaper publishing in Japan. *The Japan Chronicle* was notable for being relatively balanced and liberal in its tone. Indeed, it was, according to one authority, “the best of Japan’s pre-war English-language newspapers.”² This online version usefully also includes *The Kobe Weekly Chronicle*, the initial title of *The Japan Chronicle*.

Other English-language newspapers published in mainland Japan and included here are *Trans-Pacific* (1919–1940) and *Japan News-Week* (1938–1941). The former was published by Benjamin Fleisher, who was also responsible for *The Japan Advertiser*. Indeed,

¹ <https://info.japantimes.co.jp/archives/>.

² O’Connor 2002, pp. 334–347.

Trans-Pacific was a weekly summation of *The Japan Advertiser*. Brill's online version is the most complete available. The latter was the last independent English-language newspaper funded by foreign capital in Japan before the outbreak of the Asia-Pacific War. There is, however, an unfortunate and significant gap in coverage from summer to December of 1941, at the height of negotiations between Japan and the U.S.A.

Brill's collection also comprises two important English-language newspapers based in China: *The North China Herald* (1850–1940s), and *The North China Daily News* (1864–1950). Both papers were published in Shanghai at about the same time by the same company, one being a weekly and the other a daily. *The North China Herald* was the official journal for British consular notification, and announcements of the Shanghai Municipal Council. It also carried news and gossip about foreign nationals in the settlements in China. Meanwhile, *The North China Daily News* was the most influential daily, and the most important Anglophone source of information about East Asia. What strikes the reader today is the way news about events in Asia, such as Japan's first modern expedition to Taiwan in 1874, was distributed through a media network of English-language newspapers in Shanghai, Nagasaki, and Yokohama, Chinese newspapers in Shanghai, as well as Japanese newspapers in Tokyo.

The Brill collection also contains four English-newspapers published in Seoul, Dalian, Beijing, and Hong Kong respectively. Their shared purpose was to promote the Japanese imperial cause. The first of these, *The Seoul Press* (1907–1937), was a successor to *The Seoul Press Weekly*, founded in 1905 by the Englishman J. W. Hodge with a grant from the Japanese legation in Korea. *The Seoul Press* was in part an official riposte to *The Korea Daily News*, founded in the same year by another Englishman, Ernest Thomas Bethell, whose journalism had been critical of Japanese colonial policy. *The Seoul Press* was acquired by the Resident-General in Korea, and after the 1910 annexation of Korea it became the official daily for the Office of the Government General of Korea (Chōsen Sōtokufu).

The Manchuria Daily News (1908–1940) was the sister paper to the *Manshū Nichi-nichi shinbun*, a Japanese language newspaper founded in Dalian in 1907. Both newspapers were capitalized by the South Manchurian Railway Company. With the establishment of the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo in 1932, the paper showcased Manchukuo as a modernizing, dynamic new Asian power. With the addition of related supplements, such as *Manchuria Magazine*, *Manchuria Month*, *Contemporary Manchuria*, and *The Manchuria Information Bulletin*, the paper provides for contemporary researchers a rounded picture of Japanese power in Manchuria.

The North China Standard (1919–1930) was founded by John Russell Kennedy (1860–1928), master architect of Japan's English-language propaganda network in East Asia. Russell Kennedy brought in a series of capable editors, who between them made of the paper something substantially more than a propaganda outlet. The very fact of its pro-Japanese foundation makes the paper a useful guide to Japanese official thinking on China.

The Hong Kong News was a Japanese propaganda paper founded immediately after the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong. It ran from 25 December 1941, the day known as Black Christmas, until 17 August 1945, the week before liberation. It is an invaluable guide to life in Hong Kong under the Japanese Occupation.

The Brill collection contains other wartime publications issued under the auspices of Japan's flagship semi-official newspaper, *The Japan Times*. They include *The Japan Times*

Weekly (1938–1942) and its successor, *The Nippon Times Weekly* (1943), both of which had full-color covers. Zumoto Motosada's 1941 *Short History of The Japan Times* is also accessible here, and it demonstrates the importance to Japan of keeping some English-language channels of information open to the Western powers in wartime.

Other highlights of the Brill collection include the magazine *Contemporary Japan* (1932–1970) and *The Japan Year Books* (1931–1952), both of which are important basic sources for understanding Japan in wartime and during the Allied Occupation. *Contemporary Japan* was a quarterly magazine published in Tokyo by the semi-official Foreign Affairs Association led by Masamichi Royama (1895–1956). Each issue consisted of articles and speeches by leading Japanese intellectuals, politicians, and writers such as Baba Tsunego, as well as articles by Hugh Byas and other influential Western journalists of *The Times* and *New York Times*. *Contemporary Japan* offers a relatively even-handed view of contemporary East Asia at a time when rational discussion was increasingly under attack. *The Japan Year Books* collection, for its part, constitutes a series of directories averaging fifteen hundred pages each, brimming with information on Japan and overseas territories like Sakhalin and Manchuria. This is the most comprehensive and concise guide to the general situation in Japan for the 1930s and 1940s.

Finally, the collection *Mobilizing East Asia Online*, offers the researcher such rare periodicals as *Israel's Messenger* (1904–1941), published in Shanghai for Jewish communities in East Asia. It is a vital source of information on Jewish settler relations with official Japan and the Japanese community. In a dedicated section named “Bookshelf,” there is an extensive collection of rare English-language books and pamphlets on Japan and Asia published between the 1930s and 1950s. One such, *The Peking and Tientsin Times Christmas Supplement* (1937), is striking for the insights it affords into the foreign community in the Tianjin Concession six months into full-scale war with Japan. *Mobilizing East Asia Online* also incorporates a digital version of *The English-Language Press of East Asia, 1918–1945* (Brill 2010) by Peter O'Connor, an advisor to the collection and a specialist on English-language media in Japan and Asia.

In terms of user-friendliness, the quality and legibility of most images are only as good as the original holdings: some images are digitized from the original hard copy, and others from microfilm so that legibility is uneven. Moreover, microfilm holdings are only in black and white, even when the original was published in color. The result is a loss of historical validity. However, any researcher who has performed irksome microfilm searches of newspapers will appreciate these fully-searchable sources. The word search function is efficient, fast, and on the whole user-friendly. On the downside, searching through all the hits is hampered somewhat by the need to enter and exit each individual issue that comes up in the search results. This can be time consuming given the sheer scale of this collection. So, there is room for improvement in the subscriber interface.

Overall, however, Brill Asian Studies Primary Source Database promises to bring Japan's modern history closer to scholars and students, affording a deeper understanding of contemporary biases and hitherto unknown rivalries. This collection is certainly an essential source of information for the study of Japan and Asia in the first half of the twentieth century.

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