

Media and Myth-Making:
Matsuoka Yōsuke's Tragic Engagement with America

メディアと神話化：
松岡洋右のアメリカとの悲劇的関与

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Objective: This dissertation seeks to examine English-language media representations of the Japanese diplomat Matsuoka Yōsuke (1880 - 1946).

Matsuoka is perhaps best remembered for his condemnation of the League of Nations, followed by Japan's withdraw from the league in 1933. He is also credited as the architect of the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy in 1940. The latter event took place during his term as Japan's foreign minister, a role he began in 1940 and continued until he was ousted months before the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.¹

Matsuoka lived and was educated in the United States between 1893 and 1902; he graduated from the University of Oregon Law School in 1900. Matsuoka's youthful experience in the United States has caused many historians to view his engagement with America as a sort of love-hate relationship. Certainly, in the years leading up to Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations, Matsuoka was celebrated as a sort of "hometown hero" in the pages of English-language newspapers, especially in the Oregon press. However, thereafter his image changed. Despite repeated professions of love and friendship for the United States, Matsuoka was gradually transformed by the press into the man whose hatred of America was a direct cause of the war between the two countries. While it is unsurprising that media generated propaganda demonizes public figures working for the "enemy," the changes in perception did not stop with the end of hostilities.

¹ Due to the difference in time zones, this event occurred on December 8, 1941, from the perspective of Japan.

After the war, this image of Matsuoka, assuming mythic proportions, lay behind his indictment as a Class A war criminal. Inquiring into this myth-making process, the thesis takes up the following questions:

- 1) What was Matsuoka's experience as a youth in the United States and how was it represented in the media?
- 2) How and when did English-language media representations of Matsuoka change over the course of his diplomatic career in Japan?
- 3) How did the media portrayal of Matsuoka affect his treatment after the war ended?

Approach: This dissertation re-examines Matsuoka's thought and behavior, paying particular attention to ways in which the English-language press interpreted his attitude towards the United States and his diplomatic policies. Moreover, by establishing how the media constructed images of Matsuoka it is also possible to see how these images were incorporated into later English-language publications. The media portrayal of Matsuoka is presented as a case study to examine how the media influences and controls public thinking through the creation of myths. The dissertation analyzes more than 250 English-language newspaper articles that center on Matsuoka as well as various contemporary sources and later casual and academic sources.. The articles largely span from the early 1930s through the 1940s. The goal is a qualitative analysis of the available

media following the events of Matsuoka's life, focusing both on tone and narrative.

Data collection principally centers on English-language newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Times* as a representative national "newspaper of public record" which was also internationally circulated as the *International Herald Tribune*, and *TIME* magazine that featured Matsuoka as the centerpiece of its July 7, 1941, issue. The *New York Times* provides a clear and detailed procession of the chief events in Matsuoka's life and career, but the professional distance between Matsuoka and the authors can make it difficult to gauge how his actions were received. Therefore, a more intimate view provided by local Oregon newspapers and University of Oregon publications supplements national media reports drawn from large newspapers and Associated Press articles. Matsuoka passed his time in the United States primarily in Oregon, and the Oregon press displays a decidedly proprietary attitude when dealing with Matsuoka. These often editorial pieces allow a more in-depth look into the relationship between Matsuoka and the United States, as well as into the mutual expectations each held for the other. The published editorials that discuss Matsuoka's life and career with considerable frankness lend a degree of authority and finality to the opinions and expectations. When considering the idea of myth-making, it is these less guarded utterances that may have had the most significant sway on legacy, regardless of the actual veracity of the facts and ideas they contained.

Media Theory: Perhaps it is telling that we use the word “story” is used when describing a piece of news. Even relatively unbiased and factually based news reports are related using the narrative qualities of plot, actors in conflict, and colorful details. The Narrative Theory of Media suggests that the created narrative of a piece of news is significant both within a single story and as a method of understanding one piece of the continuing story of human history.² Not only does each story have a narrative which, depending on how it is laid out, can have a powerful effect on the reader, but we can also treat history as a whole as a stream of narrative and media stories as puzzle pieces. As such, narrative media becomes a tool for the explanation of human experiences, and also a vehicle for myth and myth-making.

On the one hand, media aspects of myth-making derive from style, that is, myth-making without a set intention to do so. On the other hand, it is also important to acknowledge that in cooperation with the government, media also plays a role in dispersing an “official” story to the public. Propaganda in media has long been a powerful tool for deliberately directing public knowledge and sentiment. Because these stories have the weight of official sanction and pressure, they are likely to be repeated uniformly across official media platforms, leaving the reader with little choice in what to believe. Propaganda driven narrative was not necessarily one-sided, as the subject of a story is able, to some degree, to

² James W. Carey, ed. *Media, Myths, and Narratives: Television and the Press*, Vol. 15 (SAGE Publications, 1988), 69.

control their self-presentation, although they cannot entirely control the way their presentation is spun in the final story.

Matsuoka was both a builder and a subject of myth. He actively sought the press with the intention of swaying public opinion to his cause. One way of gaining sympathy may have been to emphasize his Americanness, minimizing the physical and cultural distance between America and Japan by attempting to straddle the two sides. In this way Matsuoka as a potential ally was accepted and replicated in media accounts creating the myth of the “All-American Boy.” However, when his agenda, such as describing the necessity of Japan’s expansion into Manchuria or the explaining the wisdom of allying with Germany as a deterrent to war, was rejected by the US government, the journalists, and therefore the public in general, the narrative he sought to promote failed. The negative reaction to Matsuoka’s policies coalesced into a body of work turning him into the “bad boy” as “the man who detests America.” Like most myths, the myths that surround Matsuoka have elements of truth. It is possible that Matsuoka both loved and resented the United States. While it is tempting to attempt to dissect the myths in order to ascertain Matsuoka’s true identity behind these myths, the bounds of this dissertation are limited to an analysis of how narrative, as defined in media theory, contributed to their creation

Chapter 2 - The All American Boy

This chapter traces the origins of what may be called Matsuoka's foundational image or trope, that of an "all American boy." It examines Matsuoka's childhood in Japan, the decision to go to the United States, his life and experiences and education while living on the West Coast, and his early diplomatic career spanning from his return to Japan in 1902 through his role at the League of Nations conference in Geneva in 1933.

Considering that Matsuoka never intended to permanently settle in the United States and never pretended to put American interests over those of his native Japan, perhaps "all American" seems to be a strange label. However, as this chapter shows, Matsuoka embodied many of the qualities that were considered ideal amongst Americans. He grew up poor in a small rural village. He loved his mother. He was intelligent, inquisitive, and unafraid to undertake challenges. He was unwaveringly determined to better his position through hard work and to rise into a position of power and authority. In fact, it was Matsuoka's embrace of the American dream that caused him to develop his own version of the Monroe Doctrine with the aim to expand Japan's power to the mainland in Manchuria. Matsuoka hoped to create a new frontier where Japanese youths would have space to embrace the pioneer spirit he had so admired in America.

The intention of this chapter is both to shed light on the development of Matsuoka's world view and to show how Matsuoka's early engagement with America predisposed the English-language press to favor him, even when his

actions were not entirely favorable to the United States. While sometimes naughty, he was nevertheless an “all American Boy.”

Chapter 3 - Becoming a Bad Boy

Chapter Three continues this theme during the period from 1933 to 1941—these are the years that led to war with the United States. During these years Matsuoka’s “hometown hero” image saw a significant darkening. Here the focus is on the trope of betrayal and Matsuoka’s transformation from an “all American boy” into a “bad boy” known for his hatred of America.

Matsuoka left the 1933 League of Nations conference in Geneva with the media portrayal of a blunt and comical caricature. A man who may have been wrong headed but who acted out of good intentions and respected the American ideals of truth and freedom. Perhaps it was this emphasis on freedom that became his downfall. While Matsuoka’s actions in Geneva can be attributed to the will of his superiors, when Matsuoka gained the position of foreign minister in 1940, the responsibility for the actions of Japan as well as for his own decisions was placed on his shoulders. Whereas the media was willing to suspend doubt for Matsuoka the messenger, Matsuoka the decision-maker received no such latitude. Although it was possible to believe that Matsuoka carried an affection for America while withdrawing Japan from the League of Nations, his agreement with Hitler was seen as an ungrateful rebellion and undeserved aggression against the country that had once fostered him. Despite his attempts to guide the media narrative in

his favor, Matsuoka was thrust back, becoming the symbol of Japan's unprovoked aggression.

Chapter 4 - The End of the Road

While there is no defining moment when media and public opinion turned against Matsuoka, it is clear that his reputation was significantly tarnished by the time Japan and the United States went to war in December, 1941. This chapter continues the theme of myth-making through an examination of reporting on Matsuoka after the outbreak of war. For a large part, Matsuoka lived his life out of public view, but not out of public mind. The articles published during his time on the world stage left a lasting impression on a global audience. This chapter looks at Matsuoka's reaction to the war, his feelings about the ongoing conflict, and the role media played in indicting him as a war criminal. Unfortunately, Matsuoka died of tuberculosis while preparing for Tokyo War Crimes Trial. He did not live to defend himself, but the process of myth making continued to be perpetuated well after the war had ended.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

Matsuoka's diplomacy as interpreted and transmitted by the press reveals two alternate versions of Matsuoka during his tragic engagement with the United States: the "all American boy" and the "bad boy."

Though Matsuoka did his best to direct the way media perceived and discussed him, the perceptions of Matsuoka began to change, particularly during

his time as foreign minister. The “bad boy” image grew out of what might be seen as a rebound effect. Matsuoka’s established pro-America identity meant that anything running counter to this Americanism was seen as betrayal. Perhaps ironically, Matsuoka’s adoption of American ideas was seen as a good thing, but his use of those same ideas for nationalistic purposes transformed him into a “bad boy.” In particular, Matsuoka’s reputed basic understanding of Western character, that Westerners only respect power, led to a rigidity in his diplomacy that the English-language media, and in turn, the American public, interpreted as a lack of desire for amicable relations.

For most of Matsuoka’s life, these two narratives existed concurrently, often overlapping. No matter how “bad” he was being, such as his negotiation of the Tripartite Pact, Matsuoka continually insisted his actions were intended for peace, and in the best interest of both nations. Whichever their leanings, Matsuoka’s words and deeds were readily spread by the English-language media.

Throughout his lifetime, Matsuoka accused the West of a lack of understanding. According to Matsuoka, the West’s inability or unwillingness to take Japan’s precarious situation into account was difficult to fathom. His speeches during the League of Nations made it clear he felt there was a double standard; what was allowable for the West was out of bounds for Asian countries, including Japan.

In the end, with Japan defeated and no one left to advocate his good intentions, the narrative of Matsuoka the “all American boy” was smothered by

the weight of years and documents proclaiming him to be bitter, hawkish, and passionately anti-American.

Matsuoka's story, illustrated through media, therefore illustrates both the tragedy of mutual misunderstandings and of the power of media to create both popular and official discourse.

Works Cited:

Carey, James W. ed. *Media, Myths, and Narratives: Television and the Press*. SAGE Annual Reviews of Communication Research. Vol. 15: SAGE Publications, 1988.