

The Prototype of Modern Japanese Think Tanks: An Analysis of the South Manchuria Railway Survey Organization and Its Operational Mechanism (Postprint)

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Abstract

[Purpose / Significance] This study analyzes the operations and mechanisms of the research institutions of the South Manchuria Railway Company, discusses the development model of its think tank institutions, and reveals the militaristic ideology embedded in Japan's early think tank development models. [Method / Process] Using case analysis and literature survey methods, this paper examines the development model of key research institutions of the South Manchuria Railway Company, discusses the operational systems and organizational characteristics of its critical institutions, and through evaluation of its research reports, elucidates the warnings and references provided by its research institutions. [Result / Conclusion] The research institutions of the South Manchuria Railway Company served as instruments for the government and military to implement colonial and aggressive policies, possessed independent information sources, employed a networked intelligence structure to conduct on-site literature collection and field surveys, assembled professional analysts, and completed decision support through scientific methods; its semi-governmental, semi-civilian business modules possess certain reference value.

Full Text

Preamble

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An Analysis of Modern Japanese Think Tank Prototype: The South Manchuria Railway Investigation Organization and Its Operation Mechanism

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This paper analyzes the business and operation mechanism of the South Manchuria Railway Company's investigation organs, discusses the development model of its think tank institutions, and reveals the militarist ideology embedded in early Japanese think tank development models. **[Method/Process]** Using case analysis and literature survey methods, this study examines the development patterns of SMR's key investigation organs, discusses the operational systems and organizational characteristics of its critical institutions, and through evaluating its investigation reports, elucidates the warnings and references provided by these organs. **[Result/Conclusion]** The SMR investigation organization, as a tool for the government and military to implement colonial and aggressive policies, possessed independent information sources, employed a networked intelligence structure for resident literature collection and field investigations, assembled professional analytical personnel, and completed decision-support through scientific methods. Its semi-official business module holds certain reference value.

Keywords: South Manchuria Railway Company; investigation organization; think tank; national policy corporation; semi-official; colonization

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1 Research Background

Before the Japanese Diet passed the Comprehensive Research and Development Institutes Act in 1973, prototypes of think tanks had already quietly emerged. The South Manchuria Railway Company (hereinafter referred to as "SMR"), established in Dalian in 1907, served as a national policy reference and implementation institution for Japan's invasion of China. Following the Russo-Japanese War, Japan acquired the interests along the former Russian "Chinese Eastern Railway" [1], and established SMR under its national policy of "Managing Manchuria" [2]. At its inception, the first president, Gotō Shinpei, drawing on his colonial experience in Taiwan, established the Investigation Department alongside the Railway Department and Local Affairs Department. The SMR investigation organs were responsible for collecting, compiling, reporting, and

preserving data and intelligence, as well as publishing research findings and reports on specific issues [3], thereby fulfilling think tank functions.

Japanese scholar Kobayashi Hideo first defined the SMR Investigation Department as a “think tank” in his book *The SMR Investigation Department: The Birth and Collapse of the Original Think Tank* [4], which historically examines the role of the SMR Investigation Department in implementing Japan’s continental policies. A report by Japan’s Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) [5] discusses the SMR’s basic characteristics as an intelligence organization. Wu Jinan considers the “SMR Investigation Department as the progenitor of today’s Japanese think tanks” [6], a view shared by Li Jianjun [7], Zhu Meng [8], and Diao Liu [9].

Over the years, historical research on the SMR Investigation Department’s activities has been extensive, but largely confined to historical studies. A deeper understanding of the SMR as a knowledge-intensive conglomerate in terms of intelligence collection, processing, and output methods remains needed. Moreover, think tank researchers, limited by material scarcity, have been unable to fully articulate the organizational and operational characteristics of the SMR. This paper aims to outline the SMR’s development as an invading country’s think tank, discuss the operational status of key investigation institutions, analyze its investigation report formation process, and examine the pros and cons of its semi-official think tank model, thereby providing a cautionary perspective for understanding modern Japanese semi-official think tank models.

2 SMR Investigation Organization System

The SMR Investigation Department was the most critical organization among SMR’s numerous investigation organs, undergoing several name and scale changes. Regarding SMR’s headquarters investigation institutions, the national policy investigation departments successively established included: Investigation Department (1907), Investigation Section (1908), Economic Investigation Committee (1932), Industry Department (1936), Investigation Department (1938), and Investigation Bureau (1943), though their functions remained constant throughout.

2.1 Semi-Official Business System

At its establishment, SMR was characterized as a semi-official national policy corporation [10], a nature that influenced many aspects of its operations and investigation implementation. The company’s business was managed by the president, whose imperial appointment was subject to direct government supervision [10]. Funding came through dual channels, with both government and private sector contributions. Initially, half of the capital was government-funded, with the remainder raised through stock issuance, allowing profits to be distributed to shareholders.

Under this semi-official corporate nature, SMR's investigation institutions implemented a tiered business structure. First, as a national policy organ, they conducted general economic investigations and natural science and technical experimental research. Second, as a railway operation company, they performed investigations related to corporate business. Activities under the guise of general economic investigation and natural science and technical research actually involved intelligence theft and strategic resource plundering. In 1935, SMR's specific investigation business and departmental allocations were as shown in Table 1 .

The early SMR Investigation Department focused on research for anti-Russian strategies, including various forms of investigation into the politics, economics, and industries of Manchuria, China, and the Soviet Union, as well as reconnaissance of local geography and social conditions. Later, the emphasis shifted to economic and resource investigations for building the puppet state of Manchukuo, assisting in formulating and implementing colonial aggression plans against China. It also played important roles in separating North China from the rest of China and formulating invasion plans for Southeast Asia. The scope of investigations encompassed not only China, India, and the entire Asian region, but also studies and analyses of Britain, the United States, and European countries.

Beyond the SMR Investigation Department, the establishment of investigation organs within SMR's business departments to cooperate with national policy investigations was also common practice. SMR considered all activities that produced and provided business reference materials as investigations, and all organs responsible for such activities as investigation organs [11].

2.2 Investigation Organization Personnel

SMR employed a fixed staffing system with lifetime employment for its workers. Staff members were recruited through established training channels, primarily selecting outstanding personnel from railway training institutes and development schools, most of whom possessed professional backgrounds. The workforce also included *goyō* (cooperative personnel for investigations, comprising business liaisons, experts, and Japanese *rōnin*) and employees, i.e., non-regular members. SMR Investigation Department members were mostly professionals adapted to investigation work, with many proficient in three or more languages among Chinese, English, Russian, German, French, Spanish, and Portuguese. As Ito Ritsu noted, "they possessed research talent."

In 1932, SMR employed 32,705 staff members, of which researchers accounted for 3.69% [3], totaling over 1,200 individuals. By 1938, the SMR Investigation Department alone had 2,052 staff members [2], forming Japan's early think tank.

2.3 Investigation Report Service Targets

During SMR's existence from 1907 to 1945, it produced investigation reports covering agriculture, forestry, mining, transportation, finance, politics, legal systems, colonization, society, labor, geography, history, culture, and natural sciences. Post-war, over 80,000 SMR investigation reports remain [13], including more than 6,200 from the SMR Investigation Department [1], which directly influenced Japan's wartime situation analysis and policy formulation toward China and the Far East. Due to its corporate nature, SMR investigation reports were provided to three types of clients:

2.3.1 Government National Policy SMR conducted investigations focusing on railway operation profitability and the national policy pursuit of Manchurian colonization [14], providing reference bases for Japanese authorities' decision-making through data provision and research [4]. Conducting investigations for the state was the primary characteristic of SMR investigation organs. As an institution directly implementing Japan's basic national policies of "Managing Manchuria" and building the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere," SMR served as the direct enforcement agency for these policies.

2.3.2 Kwantung Army Requirements SMR's investigation business was directly related to the military. At the company's establishment, regulations stipulated that the Kwantung Army commander would provide necessary instructions regarding military-related company business [2]. The Kwantung Army Headquarters' Second Section (Intelligence) and the Army General Staff's Second Department Fifth Section were SMR Investigation Department's business counterparts [2]. In fact, after the SMR Economic Investigation Bureau was reorganized into the Large Investigation Department, investigations directly ordered by the military accounted for the majority of its workload. Influenced by militarism, investigation reports were produced to cooperate with the military's invasion of China, making their nature particularly odious.

2.3.3 Commercial Purposes SMR operated a vast business scope, establishing investigation organs within its railway, coal mining, harbor, and commercial business departments. On one hand, it treated China as a colony for raw material imports and commodity exports; on the other hand, it undertook intelligence collection missions. For example, SMR's organ in Fushun, besides managing coal mining operations, also conducted labor investigations in the puppet state of Manchukuo, which were national policy investigations in nature. These business organs served as sources of investigation reports with accurate information sources and certain concealment.

3 Investigation Organization Operation Mechanism Analysis

During its 38 years of development, SMR formed a relatively mature intelligence collection and dissemination system in the process of invading China, and its semi-official business model was retained in post-war Japanese corporate management models. The operation methods of SMR investigation organs promoted the improvement of modern Japanese corporate intelligence departments and influenced modern Japanese think tank models. Japan's modern think tank, Nomura Research Institute, shares similar investigation philosophies with the SMR Investigation Department, having originated from Nomura Securities' investigation department before developing into Japan's first private think tank.

Centered on investigation report writing and research, SMR investigation organs' operation mechanisms mainly comprised four parts: intelligence collection, information extraction and statistics, investigation report writing, and analysis, auditing, and publication—all closely integrated with reference material preservation, national policy planning formulation, and national policy implementation.

In September 1907, SMR's Tokyo Branch established the East Asian Economic Investigation Committee (directly under the president, renamed the East Asian Economic Investigation Bureau in 1910), primarily responsible for collecting East Asian economic materials, conducting investigations, and producing various reports [16]. The East Asian Economic Investigation Bureau was modeled after the investigation bureau of the European German-Austrian Bank, establishing connections with all Japanese government agencies, schools, libraries, banks, and companies that had investigation organs, mutually utilizing materials [17]. By 1923, SMR's investigation department expanded its scope to include railways, transportation, and general intelligence matters [16]. In April of that year, when Matsuoka Yōsuke became director, he oversaw foreign affairs and intelligence operations, establishing an intelligence section within the Investigation Section [18]. In 1927, an intelligence class emerged within SMR, directly under the president's office jurisdiction [19].

3.1 Networked Intelligence Distribution Points

With Dalian as the center, SMR established intelligence points within branch offices in key cities including Tokyo, Korea, "Manchuria," Tianjin, Beijing, Shanghai, New York, and Paris. The establishment of branch offices and local affairs departments was based on geopolitical considerations, facilitating both corporate business exchanges and local intelligence acquisition, processing, and liaison. The establishment of these local branches provided great convenience for subsequent field investigations and timely acquisition of resident literature and intelligence, creating an intelligence network with accurate and timely information sources. Details are shown in Table 2 .

3.2 Multi-Level Information Extraction Work

SMR systematically collected and extracted information through open-source intelligence gathering, human intelligence collection, literature research, and field investigations to reveal concealed information. Depending on the nature and requirements of intelligence, multi-layered acquisition was primarily conducted through the following approaches:

3.2.1 Compilation For static information—that is, intelligence materials that changed little over long periods—SMR focused on compiling classic works. In its early stages, the SMR Investigation Department deployed numerous personnel for literature translation work to directly obtain geographical, transportation, cultural, political, and general economic policy information. Investigation department members, proficient in multiple languages, acquired extensive foundational materials through translating classic works for use in report writing.

3.2.2 Open-Source Intelligence Acquisition SMR obtained open-source intelligence through newspapers, radio, and other public media. This method was primarily used for intelligence collection and compilation by the New York and Paris branch offices. At this time, Japan’s diplomatic authority in European and American countries was limited, and intelligence theft activities were relatively constrained. Most wartime intelligence on economic and political changes was obtained through public media and compiled into primary products in the form of press clippings.

3.2.3 Field Investigation Between 1910 and 1930, Japanese investigation agencies adopted scientific investigation methods from Europe and America [20]. The SMR Investigation Department also encouraged “field surveys in straw sandals”—that is, large-scale field investigations—for colonial and military purposes. “Social survey” was the English translation of social investigation [20], though in practice it emphasized questionnaire-based surveys such as statistical surveys, public opinion polls, market surveys, and research institution-based investigations.

Through “field surveys,” SMR penetrated economic and social spheres to obtain first-hand materials on Chinese rural areas, cities, and social customs, which proved crucial for objectively understanding China and formulating invasion and military occupation policies. Taking the 1935 operations of SMR’s Tianjin Office intelligence organ as an example, investigations included “intelligence surveys related to North China economy” [16], covering Hebei Province taxation, North China currency reform, and mineral resources in the former Suiyuan Province. SMR’s “field survey” activities, under Japan’s invasion national policy, severely violated China’s territorial sovereignty.

University and research institution professors and students participated in field investigation design: Professors and students from Japanese universities including Tokyo University and railway training institutes, as well as from puppet

government university research laboratories, participated in literature selection and survey design, becoming the source of the so-called “academic nature” of SMR investigation reports. This university laboratory participation represented the combination and practical application of academic and colonial theories in China.

3.3 Investigation Report Generation Mechanism

The purpose of SMR investigations was to “provide direct and indirect reference materials for all company business” [16]—that is, to write the *SMR Investigation Reports* for national policy business and corporate operations. Based on preliminary intelligence collection, report writing employed systematic organization and revelation.

3.3.1 Report Writing Personnel SMR produced a vast number of investigation reports of varying quality. National policy investigations were also differentiated due to environmental, personnel, and methodological constraints. From a preliminary report classification perspective, the author roughly divides the application levels into three categories:

- (1) **Basic Reports:** Primarily completed by students and employees. College students or hired personnel conducted field investigations based on survey forms pre-designed by experts to obtain first-hand literature. In rural investigations, they primarily distributed farm account books, conducted interviews with farm families based on designed questions, and recorded responses truthfully. In business investigations, they collected basic data and materials for later statistical analysis. Basic reports accounted for a large proportion of total SMR investigation reports.
- (2) **Proposition-Based Research Reports:** Primarily organized and written by experienced SMR investigation personnel. Based on established investigation topics, institutional personnel reviewed original data, verified the authenticity of survey data and related information, and compiled and researched relevant literature according to business requirements. This process primarily applied information science and statistical methods, supplemented by investigators’ experience. Such reports had rich literature and data support. For example, *Agriculture and Economy in North China* [21] was a North China research report based on rural surveys, utilizing over 180 basic investigation reports and referencing more than 200 sources. These investigation reports were relatively professional and had significant practical reference value.
- (3) **Decision-Participating Investigation Reports:** Primarily written by expert-level investigation department heads. Based on preliminary surveys and material compilation, relevant topic leaders and departments wrote special reports according to Kwantung Army instructions and comprehensive preliminary research findings, combined with relevant national

policies. These were mostly presented as pamphlets with confidential, top-secret, or special-secret classifications for military and government reference. Such reports were directly submitted to government and military personnel or directly intervened by them. For example, in 1942, Tanaka Hisaichi, chief of staff of the Japanese Army's 21st Army, served as head of SMR's North China Investigation Department. Close alignment with government and military will was an evolving trend in SMR investigation reports.

3.3.2 Report Compilation Procedures After investigation reports were written, they required review, compilation, and liaison before publication or archiving. Specific procedures included:

- (1) **Review:** Content review to determine reporting priority, with telephone reporting for urgent matters;
- (2) **Compilation:** Except for top-secret documents, abstracts were compiled and important documents were published periodically;
- (3) **Preservation:** Investigation materials could be borrowed externally;
- (4) **Liaison:** Political sections liaised with military and police organs; economic sections connected with banks and companies [3].

Due to complex business operations, investigation organs established general affairs sections responsible for report distribution, printing, allocation, and organization, with significant responsibilities. For urgent and confidential reports, direct contact with superiors was possible, with team leaders being trained professionals. Smooth review, editing, and liaison workflows ensured report accuracy and usability. Compilation through abstracting main content into collections made reports accessible and reusable, promoting material utilization and further processing.

3.3.3 Report Dissemination SMR investigation departments also had publicity responsibilities in practice, with smooth reporting and publicity channels improving SMR organizational and report utilization efficiency.

In 1936, SMR's intelligence departments were merged under the Publicity Section (Kōhōka), which was under the president's office [12]. While work nature changed little, direct connection with the president's office enabled faster task transmission. Utilizing the Publicity Section's convenience also facilitated investigation reporting and publicity. Combined with the Kwantung Agency's guarantee and convenience in intelligence transmission channels, SMR's intelligence dissemination accelerated, causing tremendous damage through reporting on China's resources, particularly in labor, immigration, colonization surveys, and field investigations in mining and agriculture.

3.4 Report Participation in Decision-Making

Examining SMR's organizational structure reveals that by the early 20th century, SMR already had the organizational capacity for large-scale data compilation and decision-support report writing. It demonstrated high-level organizational capabilities in obtaining intelligence from open sources, acquiring key information through human intelligence, evaluating signal intelligence, conducting quantitative and qualitative analysis of survey materials to obtain target characteristics, and organizing and analyzing materials using methodologies to provide decision-making references for the Japanese government and military. It also showed outstanding performance in publicity and political activism.

However, government and military intervention limited the "objectivity" of SMR's national policy reports. The investigation department's policies and business plans required military approval, and important investigation projects and budgets also needed military consent [13]. Financial and political intervention stamped SMR reports with Japanese militarist ideology. After submission, reports were often required to be repeatedly revised by the military [23]. Post-war SMR investigators recalled that although most research was conducted under national policy constraints, some valuable reports were produced through efforts to conduct genuine investigations based on reality [23]. Nevertheless, under military intervention, objectivity suffered, and the think tank function failed to play a positive role, ultimately leading Japan toward militarist destruction.

4 Warnings from SMR Investigation Organization's Decision-Making Participation

The SMR investigation organization essentially served as an auxiliary and implementation component of Japan's invasion of China national policy. Due to contemporary circumstances, establishing a semi-official think tank organ in China was historically inevitable for Japan. Setting up invasion organs in China under a government-body, civilian-use model represented Japan's chip for expanding political, military, and economic interests. The semi-official business model exemplified by the SMR Investigation Department provides both reference and warning for such think tank development:

4.1 Advantages of the Semi-Official Business Model

4.1.1 Abundant Funding Analysis of SMR investigation report utilization shows that this semi-official structure ensured adequate funding sources. The government made substantial initial investments in SMR, which were supplemented by profits from resource exploitation and investment in China. At the time of defeat, SMR's capital reached \$2.67 billion [2], with sufficient funds guaranteeing research project implementation and relatively accurate preliminary data collection.

4.1.2 Rich Information Sources and Smooth Investigation Channels

The Japanese government and military provided support and publication platforms for SMR investigations, making its reporting system more complete with smooth upward reporting channels. The investigation department was directly under the president's office, with investigations facilitated by government and military authorities, making data collection relatively accurate and reliable. Special reports were directly submitted to Japanese officials with high dissemination efficiency.

4.1.3 Relative Objectivity Participation of private capital and actual business personnel made investigation processes and results relatively professional and objective. SMR investigation organs' material collection and organization were completed by trained professionals, supplemented by resident literature collection and field surveys. Intelligence forms were more closely integrated with the situation, and information sources were closer to the core, making SMR investigation report data and analytical methods relatively professional.

4.1.4 Flexibility and Concealment The government-body, civilian-use model made SMR business functions more flexible and concealed during the invasion process. As contemporary observers described: "Japan has managed Manchuria-Mongolia for twenty years; we only know it as an aggressive policy, but cannot identify the actual traces of this aggression. Like a burglar who has already jumped over the wall and entered the room... the owner watches helplessly" [17]. Using business operations and scientific activities to assist national policy implementation, SMR's establishment represents a typical case of Japan's colonial invasion policy implementation in China. Limited by consular authority, economic and investigation activities under civilian corporate names could also circumvent official diplomatic restrictions.

4.2 Disadvantages of the Semi-Official Business Model

As a double-edged sword, the semi-official investigation business model exemplified by SMR had inevitable drawbacks:

4.2.1 Divergent Report Positions and Varying Quality SMR's large organization had complex personnel identities, including right-wing activists, Japanese Communist Party members, *rōnin*, and experts, resulting in varying report quality and positions. From the government's perspective, direct use for decision-making carried significant risks. For example, during Japan's "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" policy period, Communist Party member Nakanishi Tsutomu's *Investigation of China's Resistance Capacity* was highly sophisticated and objectively pointed out that Japan's war of aggression against China could not succeed, contradicting the authorities' will.

4.2.2 Bureaucratic Will Risk Excessive government and military capital intervention suppressed research freedom. SMR investigations commissioned by the military allowed limited autonomous development, particularly in later stages when the Kwantung Army and Japanese government embedded themselves in the SMR Investigation Department, forming B- and C-level *goyō* teams with restricted speech. Militarist forces' high demand for invasion and war-mongering rhetoric buried the SMR investigation organs' objective situation assessment, preventing Japanese think tanks from playing a positive role during World War II and ultimately leading to militarist destruction.

4.3 Warnings and References from SMR Investigation Business

With Japan's defeat, SMR collapsed. The SMR investigation reports, bearing the imprint of early 20th-century Japanese political and military aggression, sound alarms for today's think tank organizational models and report writing. Re-examining the SMR Investigation Department's development, its business modules provide relative references for cultivating professional investigation personnel, improving intelligence analysis methods, enhancing intelligence source accuracy, and increasing institutional operational efficiency.

4.3.1 Establishing Investigation Departments and Conducting Field Investigations SMR's investigation departments were extensively established with hierarchical investigations. Collected first-hand information could be reused beyond decision-making purposes, providing foundational data for multi-level reports. This investigation tradition was integrated and developed in post-SMR Japanese corporate business operations. The important private think tank Nomura Research Institute also developed from Nomura Securities' internal investigation department before becoming an independent strategic consulting institution.

From the SMR Investigation Department's business modules, investigation organs established survey points in important regions, building extensive intelligence networks that ensured material accuracy and timeliness. Within the corporation, integrated and refined organizational and business personnel conducted first-hand literature collection and compilation, making survey data organization and utilization centralized and targeted. This network-based intelligence system provided greater flexibility in information collection and data mobilization, while offering relatively objective opinions and suggestions for official decision-making.

4.3.2 Multi-Level Cooperative Business Model SMR's investigation report writing institutions cooperated with university research laboratories and field experts. Embedding research laboratories in the investigation process enabled SMR investigation reports to achieve high completion rates in contemporary data collection. Simultaneously, SMR hired experts and *goyō* personnel outside its regular establishment to conduct research. Data organization within

the corporation maintained certain confidentiality. During World War II when Japan lacked human resources, this system played a significant role in mobilizing manpower.

Moreover, SMR established close-knit networks, utilizing mutual convenience for collusion. This not only created a tight intelligence network with great convenience in information collection for plundering China's resources, but also allowed simultaneous profit-sharing and implementation of colonial policies, practicing Japan's national policy.

4.3.3 Healthy Political Orientation and Relatively Autonomous Reporting Environment As a national policy institution for invading China, the SMR Investigation Department, though carrying think tank functions, depended on the government and Kwantung Army. Strong military intervention made think tank functions serve militarist expansion policies, leading to its dissolution with Japan's 1945 defeat. Comparative studies of Japanese and Western think tank development models reveal that an autonomous and healthy think tank environment was relatively lacking in Japan's bureaucratic capital-intervened development. The SMR case demonstrates that a relatively autonomous reporting environment benefits healthy think tank construction.

When summarizing SMR's business modules, we must objectively recognize its aggressive nature, remain vigilant against militarist colonial ideology, while appropriately referencing SMR's business model. This includes reasonably establishing investigation departments, engaging in frontline surveys, correctly understanding semi-official think tank forms, and finding balanced construction approaches in practice.

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