

A Review of Chinese Scholars' Historical Research on the League of Nations

Jiayi Jiang^{1,a,*}

¹*Humanities College of Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, 311121, China*
a. 2020212705074@stu.hznu.edu.cn

**corresponding author*

Abstract: The League of Nations, as the first worldwide political organization in history, holds undeniable significance. It served as a crucial platform for China's engagement in international affairs following the First World War and played a pivotal role in China's modernization process. This paper provides a comprehensive review of the research conducted by Chinese scholars on the League of Nations since the Republic of China era. It categorizes the prevailing academic attitudes towards the League of Nations, ranging from positive to somewhat one-sidedly positive. However, it is important to note that the historical research on the League of Nations within the Chinese academic community has not been fully exhaustive, with certain aspects still remaining overlooked. The purpose of this paper is to present novel ideas and directions for future studies on this organization.

Keywords: League of Nations, Republic of China, Mukden Incident

1. Introduction

Many people held the view that the League of Nations, an international organization that was founded in 1920 and dissolved in 1946, was primarily concerned with matters pertaining to Europe and had a limited influence on territories that were not located in Europe. Recent in-depth study has, however, uncovered evidence of extensive cooperation and involvement between the League of Nations and a variety of non-European territories, including China. Among these territories is China. As part of its efforts to modernize, the Chinese government maintained constant communication with the League of Nations in order to inquire about receiving aid from other nations. Even if interactions and cooperation between the two sides were not without obstacles, they did, on the other hand, result in exceptional accomplishments. This topic has received a lot of attention from Chinese academics, and the purpose of this article is to examine the characteristics of Chinese academic research on the League of Nations during different time periods, assess the historical context of such research, determine development trends, highlight research areas that have been neglected, and propose new directions for further investigation.

2. The Republic of China Period

2.1. Positive Attitude Towards the League of Nations Before the Mukden Incident

The League of Nations was created during the Paris Peace Conference that took place in the aftermath of World War I. China joined the League of Nations as a non-permanent member in the year 1920. The League of Nations possessed considerable historical importance due to the fact that it was the first worldwide political organization in recorded history. During the early stages of the League of Nations' existence, researchers such as Zhou Gengsheng and Xia Qu conducted studies on the organization. As a result of the Chinese population's misunderstanding of the international organization at the time, various publications were produced to provide interpretations of League of Nations treaties [1]. These publications were created as a response to the widespread misunderstanding of the international organization. Since the Paris Peace Conference, a wide variety of subjects concerning the League of Nations have been investigated and subjected to in-depth critical examination. The origins, the organization, the causes, the nature, and the role it plays in settling international conflicts and fostering peace are some of the themes that will be covered. In the beginning, there was a general conviction that the League of Nations was formed in accordance with the pattern of historical progression on a global scale and was a representation of the hopes that people had for world peace. As a result, there was a widespread anticipation that this newly constituted body would play a constructive part in the process of preserving global peace and easing the transition towards post-war recovery [2]. However, when academics developed a greater grasp of the League of Nations, particularly its unfavorable position towards fascists in Germany, Italy, and Japan, they progressively became aware of the complicated causes that influenced the organization's foundation. These academics provided criticism of the League of Nations from a variety of views as well as ideas for the organization's future growth [3].

2.2. Criticism after the Mukden Incident

The Japanese Kwantung Army was responsible for the malicious planning and execution of the Mukden Incident, which took place in northeastern China on September 18, 1931. After this event, there was a large increase in the number of publications relating to the League of Nations. The majority of these publications focused on Japan's occupation and were critical of the reaction that the League of Nations provided. During this time period, one of the most important topics of research was the investigation of the organization and the part it played in the Mukden Incident.

Not only did scholars examine how the League of Nations handled the Mukden Incident as a crucial time marker, but the incident itself sparked widespread contemplation among the Chinese people regarding the League of Nations' ability to maintain world peace. This event drew considerable attention to diplomacy and international current affairs within China [4]. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the study of the League of Nations inevitably intertwined with the Mukden Incident. The incident marked not only the beginning of Japanese imperialism's armed aggression against China but also served as the precursor to the broader Asian theater of the Second World War, significantly impacting both China and world peace. Following the Mukden Incident, Chiang Kai-shek urged the army and the people not to resist, envisioning a diplomatic resolution through the League of Nations to halt Japanese aggression. However, Chiang's hopes were shattered. Although the League of Nations promptly responded and imposed sanctions, their impact was minimal, failing to deter Japan from further invading China. The aftermath of the Mukden Incident, particularly the League of Nations' ineffectiveness in arbitrating the conflict, intensified the Chinese people's interest in international current affairs. During this period, there was a substantial increase in publications concerning the League of Nations, with a focus on China-Japan relations and

the organization's response to Japan's invasion and occupation of northeast China, including severe criticism of the League of Nations [5]. While these publications provided detailed accounts of the Mukden Incident and the China-Japan conflict within the League of Nations Mediation Office, the research during this time primarily constituted historical reviews and was constrained by limited available data, resulting in a lack of breakthrough research findings.

2.3. Cooperation Between China and the League of Nations Beyond Political Interaction

Not only did Chinese academics during this time period concentrate their efforts on researching the League of Nations in and of itself, but they also paid close attention to the technological cooperation that existed between China and the organization during this time period. The Chinese people, especially after the Mukden Incident, started paying more attention to the League of Nations, and the expanding cooperation between China and the organization in fields such as economics and public health became a topic of discussion that received a lot of attention. There was a range of sentiments expressed in the domestic public discourse on this cooperation, with some individuals expressing approval and others expressing doubt [5]. However, during that time period, the general populace in China lacked factual understanding of the technical cooperation [6]. As a consequence of this, the primary objective of the research works that corresponded to it was to make use of the material that was available in order to reconstruct the beginning and end of the technical cooperation between the two parties and to discuss the relevance of this collaboration for Chinese society [7]. During the time of the Republic of China, there was a dearth of archive documents; in addition, the relationship between China and the League of Nations was complex and diverse; as a result, academics of the day concentrated the majority of their research efforts on retelling historical events. They focused mostly on the League of Nations from the vantage point of political systems when doing their research. A step backward was taken in the direction of China's relationship with the League of Nations when the Mukden Incident took place. Nevertheless, when taking into account the continued technological collaboration in a variety of disciplines outside of politics, it was clear that it played a substantial part in advancing China's modernization at the time. Regarding this particular aspect, Chinese academics have presented a more favorable assessment of the League of Nations.

3. Research after the Founding of the People's Republic of China

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, there was a reduction in specific discussions regarding the League of Nations, and no significant breakthroughs were achieved. At that time, China's study of the League of Nations largely mirrored the views and stereotypes of the Soviet Union. Yang Mu, in his book, directly pointed out that the League of Nations served as a tool for maintaining surface peace while suppressing revolutionary movements and ensuring the establishment of world hegemony by monopoly groups within each country [8]. During the League's establishment, countries engaged in disputes over the covenant, each aiming to safeguard their own vested interests. As a result, the League's creation deepened conflicts between imperialist powers. Although it was intended to safeguard world peace and security, it ultimately became completely paralyzed in the face of aggression and declared bankruptcy [9].

For a considerable period, domestic scholars' research on the League of Nations lacked depth and predominantly focused on the organization itself, often espousing outdated views. Many scholars believed that the League was merely a tool for imperialist countries to carry out aggressive policies and divide colonies. They did not perceive its practical role in maintaining world peace nor recognize its progressive nature and enthusiasm. It was not until the late 1980s that breakthroughs were made in the study of the League of Nations, leading to the emergence of new ideas and achievements. The

League of Nations was “re-understood,” and its historical significance was objectively and comprehensively analyzed.

Regarding the background of the League of Nations’ establishment, apart from focusing on Wilson and his “The Importance of the Twenty-four Points,” Wang Yanqing also emphasized the original advocate of the League of Nations, Smuts [10]. While conventional wisdom deemed the League of Nations as useless, especially in light of the provocations by German, Italian, and Japanese fascists that led to the outbreak of the Second World War, Chinese scholars gradually realized its significance in the development history of international organizations [11]. They adopted a more objective attitude in analyzing the League of Nations and the Versailles-Washington system. Unlike the traditional view, scholars believed that the League of Nations had a certain restraining effect on external expansion, delaying the outbreak of the Second World War to some extent [12]. The League of Nations’ failure did not signify the failure of the pursuit of world peace; instead, it provided valuable experiences and lessons for subsequent international organizations.

In 1946, the League of Nations held its final General Assembly and officially dissolved, transferring its powers and functions to the United Nations. From that point forward, the United Nations, as a new international organization, assumed the responsibility of maintaining world peace and security. Since the late 20th century, comparative studies between the League of Nations and the United Nations have become a popular branch of research, yielding numerous excellent results. Scholars such as Yang Zewei, Li Tiecheng, and Gao Hua have conducted systematic comparisons of the two international organizations, investigating their historical connections and differences [13].

During this period, scholars began to break through traditional views and explore the League of Nations from a fresh perspective, employing various documents. Tang Qihua and Peng Dunwen utilized diplomatic archives to examine the diplomatic interactions between the Beijing government, the Nanjing government, the League of Nations, and the foreign policies influenced by the League of Nations [14]. The cooperation between the League and China was significantly affected after the League’s disbandment, either terminated or transferred to other institutions. Consequently, research on the League of Nations within Chinese academia entered a void period. After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, mainland scholars rarely studied China’s League of Nations diplomacy and technical cooperation. Although some scholars focused on the actual work carried out by League-affiliated institutions, research on international cooperation mainly concentrated on cultural aspects, leaving ample room for further exploration of other dimensions of technical cooperation. “An Investigation into the Role of the League of Nations, 1919-1946” significantly bridged this gap [15].

In fact, it was not until the 1980s that the study of the Mukden Incident and the League of Nations in China witnessed remarkable progress. Chinese scholars excavated historical data, discerned truths from falsehoods, and utilized a wealth of diplomatic historical materials to reevaluate the Mukden Incident and the League of Nations’ investigation mission. This departure from the original standpoint of completely denying the League of Nations’ actions in the Mukden Incident allowed historians to acknowledge the organization’s efforts in the process and approach it from different perspectives.

Since its establishment, the government of the Republic of China tended to rely on the League to handle foreign affairs. Joining the League was seen as a means to obtain equal status with other countries in a legal context and gain recognition as a future power. When the Mukden Incident occurred, the national government’s diplomacy heavily relied on the League of Nations. Scholars such as Yu Xintun, Zuo Shiyuan, Luo Fuhui, Hou Zhongjun, and Hong Lan focused on the League of Nations’ foreign policy under the national government, as well as the developments following the Mukden Incident [16].

4. Chinese Academic Research on the History of the League of Nations in the 21st Century

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, there has been a continuing interest in the study of the League of Nations. On the basis of prior research accomplishments, Chinese scholars have produced more substantial work and carried out an in-depth “re-understanding” of the League of Nations from a variety of vantage points. The League of Nations has been praised for its successes in resolving international conflicts, upholding global peace and security, promoting international cooperation, and safeguarding human rights on a global scale [16]. Despite the fact that the League of Nations has been criticized for its shortcomings and operational challenges, it has also been recognized for its achievements in these areas. Increased access to resources, a greater choice of materials, and more objective appraisals of the League have all been beneficial to the research that has been conducted in this subject as a whole.

The expansion of research perspectives has been an important aspect of the study of the League of Nations in the twenty-first century. This has been particularly true in the investigation of the relationship between the organization and the United States, with a particular emphasis on President Woodrow Wilson. In addition to the examination of the organization itself, this has been an additional important aspect of the study. Despite the fact that the United States of America was never a member of the League of Nations, Woodrow Wilson is largely considered as a pivotal factor in the organization’s founding. This is the case despite the fact that Wilson served as President of the United States. As a result, gaining a grasp of the relationship that exists between the United States and the League of Nations is a subject of tremendous importance. Notable studies on Wilson’s foreign policy have been carried out by Han Li and Yin Baoli, and Zhao Qiuju’s book, “Colonel House and the Conception and Practice of the League of Nations,” digs into Colonel House’s involvement in the founding of the League [17]. Han Li and Yin Baoli’s research on Wilson’s foreign policy has been cited numerous times. During this time period, academics have analyzed the three stages of the relationship between the United States and the League of Nations by making use of the vast archive documents that are available [18]. These stages are the refusal to engage, the unofficial cooperation, and the formal cooperation [18].

The “Lytton Commission” serves as a crucial link in understanding the interaction between the Chinese Federation and the Chinese government during the Mukden Incident. Since the 1990s, as relevant archives related to the “Lytton Commission” have been organized and updated, domestic research on the commission has deepened, breaking free from preconceived notions and established views. Scholars during this period have emphasized the importance of objectively assessing the Lytton Commission’s report, particularly its positive stance on the issue of Northeast China’s sovereignty [19]. In addition to analyzing and critiquing the report’s contents, Chinese historians have also examined the reactions of various sectors in China following the report’s release. The publication of the report stirred public opinion in China, leading to strong responses. However, the prevailing sentiment was one of abandoning illusions about the League of Nations and foreign powers. In recent years, Chen Haiyi has extensively employed international historical materials to study the formation process of the Lytton Investigation Group, arguing that the League of Nations investigation group emerged as a result of competing interests among China, Japan, the League of Nations (represented by Britain and France), and the United States [20].

The actions and reactions of Japan have also been key research subjects within the framework of the League of Nations and the Mukden Incident. Dong Liang, Wu Yin, Wu Xiangping, and Xu Kangming are only few of the academics who have investigated the China-Japan relationship during that time period, with a particular emphasis on Japan’s reaction to the Li Dun report [21]. Researchers such as Huang Xuele, Geng Mi, and Wang Yubo, along with others, have investigated the shifting perspectives of major countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States with regard to the

China-Japan conflict. Their findings provide novel perspectives that still have a substantial amount of untapped potential for further investigation [22].

5. Conclusion

The evolving focus of research on the League of Nations over the past century reflects the changing attitudes of the Chinese academic community and the Chinese people towards the organization, which have been greatly influenced by China's shifting relationship with the international system during that period. As a key player, China was among the first to recognize the innovative mindset of the League of Nations upon its establishment. However, the Chinese academic community's perspective on the League underwent a significant transformation with the humiliation brought about by the Mukden Incident, turning the incident into a prominent topic of study. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, domestic conditions have changed, and China's international standing has continued to rise, leading to a gradual shift in the Chinese academic community's attitude towards the League, parallel to the nation's growing strength and evolving research perspectives. In the 21st century, even though the League of Nations is no longer in existence, the study and discussion surrounding it persist. Scholars now have the advantage of accessing various historical materials, allowing for a broader perspective and cross-validation through the utilization of archives from different countries and the organization itself. The study of the League of Nations has demonstrated a trend towards expanding beyond political and military history to include social history and cultural history.

In general, research on the League of Nations still primarily focuses on the Mukden Incident and its relationship with the organization. However, beyond this incident, there is a wealth of content worth exploring regarding the cooperation between China and the League of Nations. While this article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of research on the organization, limitations in the author's current research level and available literature prevent an exhaustive analysis of the century-long research on the League of Nations. Nonetheless, the author hopes that this review can inspire new ideas and directions for future research by other scholars. Building upon this foundation, as more relevant archives are discovered and scholars approach the League and related events from fresh perspectives, a greater number of individuals will come to recognize the League's significance during its existence and its outstanding contribution to history.

References

- [1] Zhou Gengsheng. *The League of Nations*[M]. The Commercial Press, 1922:8. Xia Qu. *The League of Nations*[M]. The Commercial Press, 1928:91-96.
- [2] Xu Dunzhang. *China's Policy towards the League of Nations*[M]. Nankai Institute Of Economics, NKIE, 1935:3.
- [3] Lu Yinzhou. *The Research of The League of Nations*[M]. The Commercial Press, 1934:3. Lin Xiqian. *Flower of Geneva*[M]. Shengli Academic Society, 1940:6.
- [4] Wang Jixi. *Sanctions of the League of Nations*[M]. The Commercial Press, 1937:22-30.
- [5] Wang Zaoshi. *The League of Nations and the Issues between China and Japan*[M]. The New Moon Publishing House, 1934:117-121.
- [6] Sun Hanbing. *The League of Nations*[M]. The Commercial Press, 1934:48-49.
- [7] Shen Liren. *Technical Cooperation between China and the League of Nations*[M]. Current affairs issue series, 1933:3-12.
- [8] Chen Hexian. *Culture Cooperation Organization of the League of Nations*[M]. Chinese Publishing House, 1934:7.
- [9] Yang Mu. *The League of Nations* [M]. The Commercial Press, 1963:127.
- [10] Wang Shenzu. *A History of International Relations*[M]. Wuhan University Press, 1983:328-329.
- [11] Wang Yanqing. *Smuts and the League of Nations*[J]. Journal of Huaiyin Teacher College Social Science, Vol.28.6.2006:795.
- [12] Yang Zewei. *The Significance of the League of Nations in the History of International Organizations*[J]. Academics in China. 1997(02):55.

- [13] Chen Xudong. *A New Understanding of the League of Nations*[J]. *World History*.1989(02):104-105.
- [14] Yang Zewei. *The Significance of the League of Nations in the History of International Organizations*[J]. *Academics in China*.1997(02):52-55. Li Tiecheng. *A Historical Comparison of the Charter of the United Nations and the Covenant of the League of Nations*[J]. *World History*.1992(05):2-11. Gao Hua. *Comparative Study of the United Nations and the League of Nations*[J]. *World Economics and Politics*.1996(05):45-48.
- [15] Tang Qihua. *The Government of the Republic of China in Beijing and the League of Nations (1919-1928)*. Dongda Publishing House.1987. Peng Dunwen. *On the Formation of the Foreign Policy of National Government Relying on the League of Nations*[J]. *Wuhan University Journal (Philosophy & Social Sciences)*.1999(01):96-100.
- [16] Yu Xintun. *China and Japan's Diplomacy during the Mukden Incident*[M]. Guangxi Normal University Press. 1997. Zuo Shiyuan, Luo Fuhui. *The Mukden Incident and the Nationalist Government's League of Nations Diplomacy*[J]. *Social Science in Nanjing*.,2008. No.254(12):55-60. Hou Zhongjun. *The Diplomacy of the League of Nations and the Nationalist Government's Policy towards Japan after the Mukden Incident*[J]. *Historical Research*.2022, No.395(01):122-141. Hong Lan. *The Diplomacy of the Nanjing Nationalist Government in the League of Nations*[M]. China Social Sciences Press,2010.
- [17] Zhang Li. *International Cooperation in China: An Examination of the Role of the League of Nations, 1919-1946*[M]. Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica.1999.
- [18] Yu Linqi, Li Boyang. *The League of Nations Mediation of International Disputes in the 1920s and Its Positive Role*[J]. *Journal of Beijing Electronic Science and Technology Institute*.2008(01):26-30. Yang Heping. *The Historical Orientation of the League of Nations*[J]. *Journal of Chongqing Normal University (Edition of Social Science)*.2007, No.117(03):80-86. Liu Yang. *A Study of the Contemporary Value of the League of Nations*[D]. Northwest Normal University.2014. Chai Rongrong. *A Reexamination of the Historical Position of the League of Nations*[D]. Inner Mongolia University.2008.
- [19] Chen Xudong. *A New Understanding of the League of Nations*[J]. *World History*.1989(02):101-102. Hong Lan. *The Response of Chinese Society Before and After the Release of The Report of the Lytton Commission's Report* [J]. *Journal of Historical Science*.2006(05):55.
- [20] Chen Haiyi. *The Response of the United States after the Mukden Incident and the Emergence of the League of Nations Investigation Mission*[J]. *Republican Archives*,2019, No.138(04):67-76. Chen Haiyi, Xu Tianna. *The Formation of the United Kingdom and the League of Nations Investigation Mission after the Mukden Incident: An Examination Based on British Archives and Documents*[J]. *Historical Review*,2019, No.181(04):170-185.
- [21] Dong Liang. *Reassessment of the Lytton Commission's report: Centered on the Japanese Response*[D]. Northeast Normal University.2010. Wu Yin. *The Failure of Japanese Diplomacy Seen from Its Withdrawal from the League of Nations*[J]. *World History*,1992(04):37-45. Wu Xiangping. *The Mukden Incident and Japan's Withdrawal from the League of Nations*[J]. *History Teaching*,2011, No.625(06):15-19. Xu Kangming. *Japan's withdrawal from the League of Nations*[J]. *Japanese Studies*,1994(02):120-135.
- [22] Huang Xuelei. *Differences and Cooperation between the United States and the League of Nations in Dealing with the 1931-1933 Far East Crisis*[D]. Anhui University.2012. Geng Mi. *The Struggle: The United States' Response to Japan's Invasion of China after the Mukden Incident (1931-1933)*[J]. *Journal of Southwest University (Social Sciences Edition)*,2015,41(03):156-165. Wang Yubo. *The United Kingdom, the League of Nations, and the Mukden Incident: A Review of Lytton Commission's report*[J]. *Historical Archives*,2002(02):123-129.
- [23] Han Li. *New Diplomacy · Old World: Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations*[M]. Beijing: Tongxin Publishing House,2002:9. Yin Baoli. *A Study of Wilson and the League of Nations*[D]. Henan University.2010:7-17. Zhao Qiuju. *Colonel House and the Conception and Practice of the League of Nations*[D]. Sun Yat-sen University.2008.
- [24] Jiang Shanshan. *The Conflict between United States and the League of Nations in the Two-Level-Game Perspective*[D]. Nanjing University.2013:65. Ge Yupeng. *From Rejection to Cooperation: An Exploration of the Relationship between the United States and the League of Nations in the 1920s*[J]. *Journal of Chongqing University of Science and Technology (Social Science Edition)*. No.12.2011:33-35.