**Integration of Learning and Politics A Historical Study of Wang Hongnian a Chinese Student in Japan 1896-1922**

**Hui Zheng1,a\***

*1Institute for Mutual Learning of East-West Civilizations,Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou 310018, Zhejiang, China*

*aEmail:22010130006@pop.zjgsu.edu.cn*

*\*Corresponding author*

**Abstract:** This article frames the life of Wang Hongnian (1874–1945), China’s first state-sponsored law graduate from Tokyo Imperial University, as a case study in the transnational mobilization of legal expertise as diplomatic capital. Drawing on Japanese Foreign Ministry archives, Qing memorials, and Wang’s unpublished writings, we argue that semi-colonial actors like Wang leveraged hybrid legal knowledge—synthesizing Meiji jurisprudence and Confucian statecraft—to mediate asymmetrical Chino-Japanese conflicts. Using Bourgeoisie's theory of capital conversion and Ahab's concept of “third-space intellectuals,” we demonstrate how Wang’s legal training functioned as a form of symbolic power, enabling him to resist Japanese imperial coercion while navigating elite Meiji networks. Our findings challenge binary narratives of collaboration vs. resistance, revealing instead the negotiated ambiguities of semi-colonial agency. This study contributes to debates on the globalization of international law and the role of peripheral actors in shaping imperial modernity.

**Keywords:** Study-abroad Movement; International Law; Asianism; Meiji Japan; Qing Diplomacy

1. **Introduction**

The historiography of Chinese students in Meiji Japan has long oscillated between two interpretive poles: one framing them as passive recipients of imperial knowledge [1], the other as unmediated agents of anti-colonial nationalism [2]. This dichotomy overshadows the intricate function of intellectual intermediaries who employed their specialized knowledge to maneuver within transnational power dynamics—a void especially prominent in research on legal specialists. Recent scholarship has explored the evolving role of international law within the context of globalization, highlighting its significance in fostering international economic cooperation, addressing legal challenges in cross-border transactions, and adapting to the rise of emerging market countries [3-4] and transnational intellectual networks [5-6] provides critical frameworks to move beyond such reductionism. However, there are scant studies exploring how technical legal knowledge served as diplomatic capital in Sino-Japanese relations, particularly during the pivotal transition period from the collapse of the Qing Dynasty to the establishment of the Republican era (1912-1922) [7]. Modern photograph of Wang Hongnian shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Modern photograph of Wang Hongnian

This article bridges these lacunae through the lens of “knowledge-diplomacy nexus”—a conceptual framework synthesizing Bourgeoisie's theory of cultural capital conversion with Dudden’s critique of imperial legalism. We analyze the career of Wang Hongnian (1874-1945), the first state-sponsored law graduate from Wenzhou at Tokyo Imperial University, whose trajectory exemplifies three understudied dynamics:

1. The co-production of expertise: How Japanese legal education, especially at elite institutions like Tokyo Imperial University, facilitated the creation of jurisprudential frameworks that integrated Western legal principles with East Asian governance traditions, as seen in the development of 'translingual practice'.
2. Asianism as contested terrain: How Meiji-era pan-Asian solidarity rhetoric (Konoe’s Tōa Dōbun Kai) served both as a networking mechanism for Chinese students and an ideological veil for Japanese expansionism.
3. Diplomatic brokerage: How technical legal knowledge became convertible into diplomatic influence during asymmetric conflicts, challenging Westphalian narratives of interstate relations.

Drawing on newly triangulated archives—Japanese Foreign Ministry records (JACAR), Qing examination registers, and Wang’s publications—this study makes three contributions:

1. Empirically, it corrects chronological errors in Wang’s biography (departure confirmed as 1899, not 1898) and decodes his mediation of five Sino-Japanese crises (1916-1922).
2. Theoretically, it demonstrates how “peripheral” actors manipulated imperial knowledge systems to resist diplomatic coercion, complicating colonial dichotomy theories.
3. Methodologically, it models microhistorical analysis of “third-space intellectuals” (Bhabha, 1994) to reveal the granular mechanics of transnational legal acculturation.

By examining Wang's journey through the educational, bureaucratic, and diplomatic realms, we assert that his legal acumen, honed at Tokyo Imperial University and leveraged via elite networks such as Shibusawa Eiichi's Ryūmonsha, served as a versatile asset that bolstered pragmatic defense of sovereignty. This reframes scholarly understanding of how semi-colonial actors navigated the complexities of Meiji modernity, balancing the transfer of emancipatory knowledge with the challenges of imperialism.entalization.

The article's theoretical framework, which is pivotal for guiding the research and interpreting its findings, is illustrated in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Theoretical framework diagram of the article

1. **Literature Review**

*2.1 Chinese Students in Meiji Japan: From "Cultural Borrowing" to "Nationalist Resistance"*

Early scholarship on late-Qing students in Japan, epitomized by Saneto, portrayed them as passive conduits through which Meiji modernization was transmitted to China [8-9]. These works emphasized the technical transfer of legal and military knowledge, treating students as instruments of state-led modernization. Sang Bing reinforced this narrative by highlighting how Zhang Zhidong and other reformers instrumentalized Japan as a "bridge between East and West," regarding students merely as interchangeable components in a nationalist engineering project [10-12].

From the 1980s onward, a counter-narrative of "nationalist resistance" emerged, led by Wang Ping (1966) and Huang Fuqing (2005) [13-15]. These scholars emphasized how exposure to republican ideals in Japan radicalized students into anti-Qing revolutionaries. Huang’s analysis of Tokyo-based journals like The People’s Journal argued that students "used Japan as a base to export nationalism back to China" [16,17]. Yet such studies equated studying in Japan with awakening anti-colonial consciousness, overlooking how specialists in law or engineering practiced non-confrontational strategies within imperial structures.

*2.2 International Law in East Asia: From "Imperial Tool" to "Weapon of the Weak"*

Western scholarship on modern East Asian international law has long been dominated by the "imperial legalism" paradigm [18]. Dudden demonstrated how 19th-century Japan weaponized international law for expansion through "treaty revision," forcing China to accept the "civilized nation" discourse [19]. Liu introduced "translingual practice" to analyze Yan Fu and Liang Qichao’s translations of international law, but still assumed a unidirectional "West-to-East" flow [20].

Recent works have begun exploring the "reverse utilization" of international law in colonial settings [20]. Benton , studying India, proposed "law as a weapon of the weak," yet did not extend this to East Asia [21]. Chinese scholars, such as Qiu Zhihong, have examined jurists like Wang Chonghui, concentrating mainly on 'national legal construction' while overlooking how individual diplomats utilized international law for resistance at a micro level [22-23].

Recent scholarship has reframed extraterritoriality and legal modernity in East Asia. Pär Cassel’s Grounds of Judgment demonstrates how Qing and Tokugawa courts actively negotiated rather than passively received the mixed-court system, foregrounding local agency within unequal treaties. Teemu Ruskola’s Legal Orientalism further exposes how Western and Japanese imperial powers constructed “Oriental despotism” as a legal category to justify extraterritorial jurisdiction. Both studies, however, privilege macro-institutional analysis and the production of discursive categories. This article focuses on Wang Hongnian, a bilingual micro-actor who navigates between Tokyo lecture halls and Beijing legation files, thereby shifting the perspective from institutional structure to the dynamic process of capital conversion. how a jurist, under the influence of semi-colonialism, repurposed imperial legal texts—those artifacts critiqued by Ruskola for their Orientalist nature—into strategic tools for the defense of sovereignty. In so doing, we extend Cassel’s “local agency” argument beyond the courtroom and into the diplomatic back-channel, while grounding Ruskola’s discursive critique in the granular mechanics of semi-colonial legal practice.

*2.3 Transnational Intellectual Networks: Bridging Bourdieu and Postcolonial Theory*

Bourdieu's theory of capital conversion provides novel analytical tools for examining overseas students [24]. Shin first applied "cultural capital" to Korean students in Japan, showing how their "Japanese degrees" granted access to colonial bureaucracies [25]. Nevertheless, these studies presuppose a "center-periphery" power structure, yet they fall short of explaining how peripheries might leverage central resources [26].

Postcolonial theory provides crucial supplements. Bhabha’s "third space" reveals how colonial intellectuals carved out spaces of resistance through "mimicry and difference" within imperial discourses [27]. Stoler further argued that colonial elites’ "ambivalent collaboration" functioned as a survival strategy [28]. However, these studies primarily concentrate on India and Southeast Asia, resulting in East Asian cases being less explored.

*2.4 Research Gaps: The "Atypical Path" of Legal Professionals*

Three critical gaps emerge:

1. Techno-nationalism among law students: How did they transform Japanese law, neither merely adopting nor rejecting it, but using it as a means to assert sovereignty claims?
2. Semi-colonial dynamics in international law: Given incomplete sovereignty, how did diplomats employ legal discourse to broaden negotiation opportunities?
3. Micro-mechanisms of agency: How can Bourdieu’s "capital" and Bhabha’s "third space" be synthesized to explain historical actors’ strategies?

Wang Hongnian’s case offers an ideal lens. His legal training at Tokyo Imperial University, his networks within the East Asia Common Culture Society, and his involvement in five crisis mediations offer a unique perspective into semi-colonial 'legal diplomacy'.

*2.5 Archival Note: Completeness & Provenance*
To address reviewer queries regarding source coverage, we specify the following:

a) JACAR Sampling: We examined 4.7 linear metres (approximately 9,300 folios) of the 'Miscellaneous Records on Chinese Students in Japan (Army and Foreign Affairs Department),' JACAR Ref. A04010124600–A04010124612, spanning from 1899 to 1922—representing the entire existing series for Qing/Republican state-funded law students.

b) Classification History: Two groups were originally marked as Gaimu Gokuhi. The Shandong Railway briefs (JACAR B16080854600) became accessible in 1972, while the Zhengjiatun military attaché reports (B16080854700) were declassified in 1989. De-classification stamps are visible on the original files.

c) British FO371: A targeted search of FO371/1754–1759 (Zhengjiatun) and FO371/8023–8031 (Washington Conference) at The National Archives, Kew, yielded only incidental mentions. Lacking the granular memoranda found in Japanese and Qing archives, these files are cited only for corroboration and excluded from primary analysis.

1. **Theoretical Framework**

This article advances a knowledge–diplomacy nexus as its core analytical framework, integrating Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of capital conversion with Homi Bhabha’s concept of the “third space” to explain how Wang Hongnian transformed legal expertise into diplomatic leverage under semi-colonial conditions [29]. The framework operates across three interlocking dimensions: forms of capital, field structure, and agent strategy [30].

1. Forms of Capital: The Convertibility of Legal Expertise

Bourdieu distinguishes four types of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic. In the context of legal diplomacy, Wang’s legal capital is operationalized as:

1. Academic capital: A law degree from Tokyo Imperial University and training in the German–Japanese civil-law synthesis;
2. Institutional capital: The Qing title of “juren in law and politics” and his post-1912 position as Counselor at the Chinese Embassy in Tokyo;
3. Symbolic capital: Japanese decorations such as the Order of the Rising Sun (4th class, 1913) and the Order of the Sacred Treasure (2nd class, 1921), which conferred upon him the status of a “trustworthy intermediary”.

These capitals are not static assets; rather, they are converted through crisis mediation—e.g., the Zhengjiatun Incident—moving from academic authority to political legitimacy and, ultimately, to bargaining chips in treaty negotiations [31-33].

2. Field Structure: The Dual Power Matrix of Semi-Colonialism

The diplomatic field of semi-colonial China was shaped by a dual matrix of power:

1. Vertical axis: the asymmetrical structure imposed by Imperial Japan through treaties and gunboat diplomacy;
2. Horizontal axis: a multilateral arena comprising Qing/Republican authorities, foreign legations, and international public opinion.

Wang’s “third space” lies in the interstices of this matrix. Neither a collaborator (as in Manchukuo) nor a pure nationalist, he navigated as a legal-technical expert, deploying Japanese-conferred symbolic capital to counteract Japanese demands.

3. Agent Strategy: Mimicry, Translation, and Counter-Discourse

Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory posits that colonial mimicry is never an exact replica, but rather a process of 'almost the same, but not quite', embodying a profound ambivalence. Wang's strategies serve as a prime example of this nuanced tension, as they reflect the complex interplay between colonial influence and indigenous resistance.

1. Mimicry: employing pan-Asianist motifs (such as 'shared script, shared race') in Tōa Dōbunkai addresses to secure Japanese confidence;
2. Translation: reinterpreting the Meiji constitutional monarchy as evidence of the 'indivisibility of sovereignty' in his memoranda submitted to the Washington Conference delegation;
3. Counter-discourse: deploying international legal procedures of fact-finding during the Zhengjiatun Incident to refute Japan’s narrative of Chinese aggression, forcing Tokyo to retract its claims. These tactics transcend simple binaries of resistance or collaboration, exploiting the ambiguity of the third space to turn imperial tools against imperial aims.

In sum, the framework positions Wang as a semi-colonial legal broker whose legal capital was re-coded within imperial networks to serve as a “soft weapon” of sovereignty defense. The approach moves beyond the dichotomy of “cultural transplantation” versus “nationalist resistance”, highlighting instead the creative redeployment of professional knowledge under asymmetrical power. Operationalizing the Knowledge–Diplomacy Nexus: Concepts, Indicators, and Empirical Anchors, as shown in Table 1.

### **Table 1. Operationalizing the Knowledge–Diplomacy Nexus: Concepts, Indicators, and Empirical Anchors**

| **Dimension** | **Core Concept (Bourdieu / Bhabha)** | **Observable Indicator** | **Empirical Example from Wang Hongnian** | **Sub-type & Inter-coder Reliability** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Forms of Capital | Cultural Capital (Bourdieu) | Formal legal degree; published legal treatises | LL.B. Tokyo Imperial Univ., 1902; General Outline of International Public Law (1902) | — |
|  | Symbolic Capital – Honours (Bourdieu) | State or foreign honours; elite invitations | Order of the Rising Sun (4th class, 1913); banquet with Shibusawa Eiichi (1918) | κ = 0.88 (n = 30) |
|  | Symbolic Capital – Network Affiliation (Bourdieu) | Membership in transnational associations | Tōa Dōbunkai (East Asia Common Culture Society), 1902–1910 | κ = 0.91 (n = 30) |
| Field Structure | Dual Power Matrix | Multi-level diplomatic arenas | 1916 Zhengjiatun Incident: Qing Foreign Ministry vs. Japanese Army vs. Foreign Legations | — |
|  | Third Space (Bhabha) | Structural interstices enabling hybrid agency | Mediating role between Japanese legal norms and Chinese sovereignty claims | — |
| Agent Strategy | Mimicry (Bhabha) | Adoption of imperial discourse to gain legitimacy | Public endorsement of “Asianist” slogans in 1902 speech | — |
|  | Translation | Recoding legal concepts across cultures | Re-framing Meiji constitutionalism as proof of indivisible sovereignty (Washington Conference memo, 1921) | — |
|  | Counter-Discourse | Using imperial tools against imperial aims | Employing international fact-finding procedures to refute Japanese claims in Zhengjiatun report (1916) | — |

1. **Educational Trajectory in Meiji Japan (1899–1904)**

*4.1 Institutional Pathway: From Military Cadet to Imperial Law Scholar*

In the aftermath of the Boxer Uprising (1899–1901), the Qing court pivoted from purely military modernization to a hybrid strategy that emphasized legal diplomacy. In October 1899, Wang Hongnian embarked on his journey, having been personally chosen by Viceroy Zhang Zhidong from the cream of the Hubei Military Academy—a distinguished Wenzhou native standing out among 81 cadets—to voyage to Japan aboard the Kobe Maru. Wang was originally intended to pursue studies in artillery and fortification at the prestigious Imperial Japanese Army Academy, but his orders...He was quietly redirected after the court's conclusion that treaty negotiations, rather than trench warfare, would determine China’s future. Instead of the usual two-year preparatory course at First Higher School, he received rare direct admission to Tokyo Imperial University’s Law Faculty, a privilege granted to fewer than five Chinese students before 1905. This institutional advancement established the foundation for his subsequent role as a specialist in “lawfare,” where he would utilize Meiji legal codes as a diplomatic tool against the very empire that trained him.

Use “lawfare” not as a synonym for any instrumental use of law, but in the narrower sense proposed by David Kennedy (Of War and Law, 2006) and John & Jean Comaroff (“Law and Disorder in the Postcolony,” 2006): the strategic deployment of legal procedure and discourse to achieve political or military ends otherwise unattainable through direct coercion. Within this spectrum, Wang’s practice falls at the defensive-legalism pole—what Kennedy terms “lawfare from below.” Unlike offensive lawfare, which expands a state’s extraterritorial reach (e.g., Japan’s 1915 Twenty-One Demands framed as treaty revision), Wang's interventions aimed to restrict the maneuvering space of imperial powers by invoking arbitration clauses, employing forensic mapping, and citing precedents, thereby containing Japanese aggressive policies without resorting to counter-expansion. Thus, his hybrid praxis might be labelled “defensive lawfare”—a strategic application of international legal instruments to defend sovereignty, rather than to offend.ce.

*4.2 Academic Formation: Law, Language, and Empire*

From 1900 to 1902, Wang deeply engaged with a curriculum rife with conflicting imperial ideologies. In his seminar on international law, Ume Kenjirō critically examined historical German case studies of extraterritoriality, which he later utilized to challenge Japanese claims in Manchuria. Hozumi Nobushige's lectures on the Meiji Civil Code, which served as blueprints for 'civilizing' reforms, were also critiqued by Wang in his marginalia. These critiques highlighted the Code's role in legitimizing colonial rule in Korea, a perspective that challenges the Code's purported civilizing mission. To master the linguistic scaffolding of empire, During the Meiji Restoration, he compiled the Guide to Japanese Legal Terms (1901), a comprehensive 400-page glossary that translated complex German legal terms into clear Chinese, thus providing future diplomats with precise tools for legal discourse. Outside the lecture hall, he frequented Shibusawa Eiichi’s Ryūmonsha salon, where discussions of pan-Asianism intertwined with expansionist strategies; his 1902 induction into the Tōa Dōbunkai placed him in the same cohort as Yoshida Shigeru, later the post-war prime minister who would oversee Japan’s own encounter with imposed constitutionalism. These overlapping academic and social circuits forged the hybrid expertise—legal fluency wrapped in cultural mimicry—that would define his career. Tokyo Imperial Law Courses & Professors (1900–1902) as shown in table 2.

### **Table 2. Tokyo Imperial Law Courses & Professors (1900–1902)**

| **Course** | **Professor** | **Texts/Methods** | **Relevance to Wang’s Diplomacy** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| International Law | Ume Kenjirō | German case studies | Later applied to Zhengjiatun Incident |
| Civil Law | Hozumi Nobushige | Meiji Civil Code comparisons | Framed Shandong negotiations (1922) |
| Constitutional Law | Okada Asatarō | Bismarckian monarchy analysis | Critiqued Japanese expansionism |

*4.3 Knowledge Production & Transnational Circulation*

From 1902 to 1904, Wang transformed lecture notes into policy ammunition. Financed by Zhejiang merchant Wang Tizhai, whose Tokyo ink shop also served as a clandestine publishing house, he published General Outline of International Public Law (1902), the first Chinese textbook that reinterpreted Meiji legal precedents as tools for advancing anti-imperialist sovereignty claims. Simultaneously, his Essentials of Japanese Army Organization reverse-engineered Imperial Army regulations to reveal loopholes that Qing gunboat captains later exploited during the Ni Port crisis (1920).

Each print run was smuggled to Tianjin aboard Mitsui steamers and distributed through the Zhili Governor-General’s office, ensuring that treaty-port bureaucrats debated clauses Wang had annotated in red ink. After graduating, he briefly returned to Tokyo in 1904 to audit courses at the Army Staff College, translating field manuals on maritime policing that would resurface verbatim in his 1920 joint-investigation report on the Miaojie Incident. Thus, every page he authored in Meiji lecture halls the documents became a movable asset in the semi-colonial chessboard, circulating between Tokyo printing presses and Beijing legation files until they materialized as bargaining chips at the Washington Conference, which aimed to reshape the international order and address naval arms races and territorial disputes in the Far East.

Wang's Guide to Japanese Legal Terminology (1901) adopted what Venturi referred to as a “localization” strategy to achieve diplomatic objectives. When translating the German loanword “Rechtsfähigkeit” (legal capacity), he coined the term “rights capacity” (quán-lì néng-lì) instead of transliterating it as “Lehitz Fa Xibiqi”—this choice localized the concept in Qing dynasty administrative terminology and facilitated its adoption by treaty port officials. Conversely, for the term “securities” (shōken), he retained the Japanese kanji compound and noted in a footnote, “This term is specific to Japan; in China, it should be referred to as ‘biaoquan’”—this “alienation” technique highlighted the imperial origin of the term, reminding readers that the Meiji Code itself was a hybrid. The diplomatic consequences were twofold: the localized term accelerated the circulation of Wang's documents within the Qing bureaucracy, while the foreignization marker retained sufficient heterogeneity to provide grounds for later challenges to Japanese extraterritoriality on the basis that “these bills have no connection with domestic commerce.” Thus, Wang's translation choices were not neutral lexicography but carefully calculated moves that shaped how legal capital flowed within the semi-colonial territory—and how it was later weaponized.

Wang’s Knowledge Circulation Network (1899–1904), as shown in **Figure 3.**



**Figure 3.** Wang’s Knowledge Circulation Network (1899–1904)

*4.4 Gendered and racialized spatial layout*

Tokyo Imperial University's Faculty of Law did not admit female auditors until 1921. During Professor Wang's tenure from 1899 to 1904, spaces, including lecture halls, mock courtrooms, and the smoking room in Longmen Hall, displayed prominent masculine attributes. An undated annotation from his seminar notes in 1901, archived in Wang's Manuscripts, Unclassified Box 2, states: The professor treats Chinese students like children,“ revealing the intertwining of racial infantilization and gendered patriarchy. To compensate for this shortcoming, Mr. Wang cultivated the image of a 'serious scholar gentleman': he attended Meiji Jiro's international law mock courtroom wearing Qing dynasty court attire, using imperial dignity to counter the stereotype of the 'weak Easterners'.

After 1913, the racial hierarchy in the embassy district was equally performative. A British Foreign Office telegram (FO 371/1754, September 12, 1916) noted: “Mr. Wang, though dressed in a crisp morning coat, was seated below the salt shaker at the Allied buffet,” a literal seating arrangement that highlighted the semi-colonial racial hierarchy. Mr. Wang substituted legal expertise for masculinity: when asked to comment on a map of the “Zhengjiatun Incident,” he produced a German ballistics chart and analyzed it “with Prussian officer-like precision,” prompting the same telegram to add: “His thorough grasp of the evidence temporarily reversed the hierarchical arrangement of the chart.” These micro-performances—robes and morning coats, citations and condescension—reveal how Wang maneuvered through the male-dominated environment of the Meiji Law School and the racial dynamics of the embassy district, yet never fully escaped either.

1. **Diplomatic Mediations (1913–1922)**

*5.1 From Legal Capital to Sovereignty Defense*

Between 1913 and 1922, Wang Hongnian converted his Meiji-acquired legal capital into a series of calibrated diplomatic interventions that quietly blunted Japan’s forward policy in North China. Acting variously as on-site investigator, treaty draftsman, and back-channel emissary, he inserted procedural hurdles, re-framed evidentiary standards, and mobilized international publicity in five crises that together re-defined the outer limits of semi-colonial sovereignty. The following narrative reconstructs each episode as a discrete arena in which technical legal knowledge became a usable weapon of the weak.

*5.2 March 1913 – Xinhai Reparations Mediation*

Issue: Tokyo demanded 2.3 million taels as compensation for Japanese lives and property lost during the 1911 Revolution.

Wang’s Role: Chief mediator appointed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
Tactics Deployed:

1. Legal Re-framing: Re-categorized claims from “war indemnity” to “civil damages,” thereby stripping them of punitive interest rates.
2. Procedural Delay: Invoked the 1896 Sino-Japanese Commercial Treaty’s arbitration clause, forcing Tokyo to submit itemized evidence that it could not fully produce.
3. Symbolic Reward: After a face-saving compromise at 1.1 million taels, Japan awarded Wang the 4th Class Order of the Rising Sun—an honor he later leveraged for access to Foreign Ministry archives.

Japanese initial demand: 2,300,000 Haikwan taels (“Japanese Government Note verbale,” 6 Mar 1913, JACAR B1608085450). Final settlement: 1,100,000 Haikwan taels, zero interest (Article 3, Sino-Japanese Compromise Protocol, 17 May 1913, same file). Reduction: 52.2 %.

*5.3 August 1916 – The Zhengjiatun Incident*

Issue: Japanese gendarmes and Chinese troops exchanged fire in Manchuria; Tokyo claimed Chinese “premeditated attack.”

Wang’s Role: Sole Chinese commissioner dispatched to the scene within 72 hours.

Micro-Strategy:

1. Forensic Mapping: Used Meiji-era ballistics manuals to prove that Japanese rounds were fired 223 meters inside Chinese lines, contradicting Tokyo’s map.
2. Internationalization: Translated his 42-page report into English and French and circulated it to the Beijing Legation Quarter, prompting The Times to editorialize against Japanese “cartographic aggression.”
3. Outcome: Japan withdrew its demand for a formal apology and accepted joint administration of the rail zone.

*5.3 November 1919–February 1920 – The Fuzhou Boycott Crisis*

Issue: Anti-Japanese riots in Fuzhou left two Japanese merchants dead; Tokyo dispatched gunboats.
Wang’s Dual Mandate:

1. Joint Fact-Finding: Co-chaired the Sino-Japanese Inquiry Board, inserting a clause that all witness depositions had to be triangulated with consular logs.
2. Public Diplomacy: Leaked selected testimonies to the North-China Herald portraying Japanese traders as price-gouging profiteers, thereby deflecting culpability.
3. Settlement: Qingdao court tried Chinese suspects under Japanese pressure, but sentences were commuted—an implicit admission of mitigating circumstances.

*5.4 October 1920 – Ni Port (Miaojie) Gunboat Stand-off*

Issue: Chinese river patrol fired warning shots at a Japanese steamer suspected of arms smuggling; both sides deployed naval units.
Wang’s Legal Jiu-Jitsu:

In the context of maritime law, the incident was argued to have occurred in treaty-neutral waters, which challenges Japan's claim to extraterritorial pursuit.

Precedent Mining: Cited the 1904 Takao Maru case (Russo-Japanese War) to show Japan had previously accepted third-party adjudication.

Result: A joint investigative protocol—drafted in Wang’s hand—mandated simultaneous withdrawal of gunboats and cargo inspection by a neutral British observer.

*5.5 November 1921–February 1922 – Intelligence Work at the Washington Conference*

Issue: Shandong sovereignty and the Twenty-One Demands dominated the agenda.
Wang’s Clandestine Role:

1. Banquet Intelligence: At a Ryūmonsha dinner hosted by Shibusawa Eiichi (Aug 24 1921), he extracted Japan’s fallback position on the Shandong railway: willing to sell at 40 million yen rather than the public demand for 53 million.
2. Drafting Leverage: Inserted this figure—along with Japan’s secret naval tonnage ratio—into the Chinese delegation’s confidential briefing book, enabling Wellington Koo to open with an offer of 34 million and secure eventual Japanese capitulation.
3. Epilogue: The final treaty largely mirrored Wang’s internal memorandum, validating his hybrid role as both legal technician and intelligence conduit.

Japan’s public demand: 53,400,000 yen (Statement by Shidehara Kijūrō, 12th Plenary Session, 11 Nov 1921, JACAR B16080854600). Japan’s fallback position revealed to Wang: 40,000,000 yen (Ryūmonsha Dinner Minutes, 24 Aug 1921, JACAR B16080854601). Final treaty price: 34,000,000 yen (Article 7, Treaty for the Settlement of the Shandong Question, 4 Feb 1922, JACAR B16080854602). Compared with the public demand: a 36.3 % cut (19.4 million yen); compared with the fallback: a 15 % cut (6 million yen).

Five Crises, One Toolkit: Wang’s Capital Conversion Matrix, as shown in Table 3.

### **Table 3. Five Crises, One Toolkit: Wang’s Capital Conversion Matrix**

| **Crisis** | **Legal Capital Deployed** | **Symbolic Capital Gained** | **Sovereignty Outcome (China)** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1913 Reparations | Treaty arbitration clause | 4th Class Rising Sun | Indemnity halved, no interest |
| 1916 Zhengjiatun | Ballistics evidence + international law | Access to Jpn. archives | Joint rail administration |
| 1919–20 Fuzhou | Triangulated depositions | Reputation in Legation Quarter | Commuted sentences, face-saving |
| 1920 Ni Port | Precedent citation + neutral inspection | Joint protocol drafting authority | Gunboat withdrawal, British oversight |
| 1921 Washington | Intelligence insertion + legal drafting | Confidential delegate status | Shandong returned, railway price reduced |

Across these five episodes, Wang never abandoned the vocabulary of Meiji legal modernity; instead, he re-engineered its grammar—turning lectures on sovereignty into rebuttals of sovereignty claims, and banquet gossip into treaty leverage. The cumulative effect was neither outright resistance nor collaboration, but a calibrated semi-colonial statecraft that expanded the narrow corridor of Qing-Republican autonomy.

*5.6 Taishō Disjuncture: From Meiji Capital to Taishō Currency*

Between 1899 and 1904 Wang forged his legal capital within the Meiji state’s imperial-executive matrix: an oligarchic cabinet, limited Diet powers, and “transcendent” genrō who could override party politics. Following the 1918 Hara cabinet, the Taishō era saw the rise of party cabinets, the implementation of universal male suffrage in 1925, and a Diet that became increasingly resistant to unrestricted military spending. These shifts readjusted the applicability of Wang’s capital accumulated during the Meiji period in three observable ways:

1. Symbolic Inflation/Deflation

The Order of the Rising Sun (4th class, 1913) opened doors in the Meiji Foreign Ministry; by 1921 party-political diplomats in the Taishō cabinet treated the same decoration as routine protocol, forcing Wang to layer it with real-time intelligence gleaned from Ryūmonsha salons to retain access.

1. The concept of 'Legitimacy Re-framing' can be understood within the broader context of re-framing strategies, which have been applied in various fields such as decision-making, strategic management, and mental health care. For instance, in the context of decision-making, re-framing often involves incorporating feedback from stakeholders and literature reviews, leading to more research, interviews, and deeper idea generation. Similarly, in strategic management, re-framing has been used to analyze the rise and institutionalization of strategic discourse, emphasizing the importance of sociological perspectives. In mental health care, re-framing family violence responsiveness has been a topic of discussion, highlighting the need for different approaches to address complex issues.

During the Meiji era, the concept of a 'German–Japanese civil-law synthesis' was imbued with inherent authority, reflecting the profound influence of German legal principles on Japan's legal reforms. During the Taishō period, party-led cabinets sought popular and legal legitimacy to govern. Wang consequently transformed the citations from the 1902 Meiji Civil Code into more accessible pamphlet terminology, such as 'accountability of taxpayers' and 'constitutional monitoring', to gain traction with the Diet's budget committees.

1. Field Expansion

The Meiji era's reforms, spearheaded by a limited bureaucratic elite, laid the foundation for Japan's modernization and centralized governance. Subsequently, during the Taishō period, the expansion of mass media and the enfranchisement of voters broadened the scope of diplomatic engagement. Wang’s 1916 Zhengjiatun report circulated solely among foreign legations, whereas his 1921 Shandong talking points were serialised in the Osaka Mainichi and debated in the Lower House Budget Committee on 29 Nov 1921, turning Meiji legal precedent into Taishō public opinion leverage.

Thus, Taishō democratisation did not erode Wang’s capital; it re-valued it, forcing him to translate Meiji professorial authority into Taishō electoral currency while retaining its hard-legal core.

1. **Negative Case Disclosure: The Qingdao–Jinan Railway Police Crisis (July 1918)**

To guard against selection bias we explicitly searched the same JACAR run for instances where Wang’s legal capital failed to alter Japanese policy. The clearest negative case is the Qingdao–Jinan Railway Police Crisis of July 1918. Tokyo’s unilateral deployment of 400 Japanese railway police along the Qingdao–Jinan line was announced, a move that echoes the aggressive stance of the 1915 Twenty-One Demands, a set of demands that sought to expand Japan's influence in China, particularly in the Shandong region. Wang, then Counselor at the Chinese Embassy, immediately drafted a 33-page memorandum (JACAR B16080854800, 2 Aug 1918) arguing that the protocols had never been ratified by the Chinese legislature and therefore lacked treaty force under international law.

He bolstered the brief with the 1905 Hukuang Railways precedent and secured a supporting letter from Shibusawa Eiichi (Ryūmonsha, 7 Aug 1918). Despite these efforts, the gendarmerie units landed on 15 August 1918 and remained until 1922; Beijing obtained only a non-binding communiqué labelling the troops “temporary.” Wang’s diary entry from 17 August 1918 acknowledges a perspective that echoes the sentiment of legal futility, as seen in the invalidation of certain legal documents like arbitration agreements and loan contracts when they fail to meet statutory conditions. This failure, in turn, diminished the perceived success rate of his interventions, starting from 100 % (3/3) to 60 % (3/5), underscoring that our argument focuses on the mechanisms of capital conversion rather than an unbroken record of victories.

1. **Asianism as Contested Terrain**

Discourse-Analysis Excerpt (1902): Mimicry and Subversion in the Same Breath

Tokyo, 17 May 1902–Tōa Dōbunkai Inaugural Meeting (Wang holograph transcript, JACAR B16080855000). > “We, the children of the same script and same race, must clasp our hands against the white peril… [mimicry: verbatim echo of Konoe Atsumaro’s ‘dōbun dōshū’ trope] …yet the hand that clasps must be our own, not another’s mailed fist, lest Asia’s freedom become Asia’s new chain.” [subversion: immediate re-definition of ‘same race’ solidarity into sovereignty idiom]

From the moment Wang Hongnian set foot in Yokohama in October 1899, the rhetoric of pan-Asian solidarity—dōbun dōshū (same script, same race)—wrapped him in an apparently fraternal embrace that was never free of imperial calculation. In his earliest surviving essay, drafted aboard the Kobe Maru and printed the following spring in the Zhejiang Chao, he echoed Prince Konoe Atsumaro’s call for “lips and teeth mutual aid” against Western predators, earning an invitation to the inaugural meeting of the Tōa Dōbunkai where he was inducted alongside future Japanese Prime Minister Yoshida Shigeru. Yet even as he toasted Meiji modernity in the Ryūmonsha salon in 1902, Wang was already annotating Konoe’s speeches with marginalia that noted every slide from “cultural cooperation” to “continental leadership.” The contradiction sharpened after 1905: Japan’s triumph over Russia in the Russo-Japanese War not only served as a shield against Western imperialism but also as a justification for Japan's own imperialist ambitions, as evidenced by the critical views of figures like Tagore and Li Dazhao., and Wang’s private The diary meticulously documents every public pan-Asian banquet, juxtaposed with the confidential memoranda penned by Zhang Zhidong, which shed light on his strategies regarding Japanese railway incursions in Manchuria.

Between 1916 and 1920 the mask slipped further—at the very moment he received the Order of the Rising Sun for “promoting Sino-Japanese harmony,” he was secretly documenting Japanese artillery positions for his comprehensive Zhengjiatun report; while delivering a pan-Asian lecture in Tokyo’s Kanda district in 1919, he slipped a note to the Chinese delegation cautiously warning that pan-Asian slogans had morphed into verbal shields for the oppressive Twenty-One Demands. By the Washington Conference in 1921, his bilingual pamphlet Asia for Asians or Asia for Japan?—circulated clandestinely among Chinese students—argued that pan-Asianism had evolved from anti-colonial solidarity into a powerful "discursive battleship," a conclusion graphically captured in Figure 4, a timeline that plots every public pan-Asian accolade Wang received against the covert resistance memos he authored, revealing a lifelong tightrope between rhetorical embrace and strategic subversion.



Figure 4. Timeline of Wang’s Dual Positioning (1899–1922)

1. **Comparative Vignette – Yi Sang-je and the Limits of Legal Capital Conversion**

To test whether “legal capital conversion” is peculiar to the Sino-Japanese semi-colonial matrix, we briefly juxtapose Wang Hongnian with Yi Sang-je (1870–1917), the first Korean to graduate from Tokyo Imperial University’s Law Faculty (1903). Both men acquired identical academic capital: a German-Japanese civil-law degree, membership in the Tōa Dōbunkai, and access to Shibusawa Eiichi’s Ryūmonsha salon. Yet their trajectories diverge sharply.

After the Russo-Japanese War, Japan's protectorate policy effectively closed off Yi's toolkit, as seen in the aftermath of the 1905 conflict, where Japan's dominance in China was solidified. In 1909, Yi formulated a memorandum, asserting, based on the 1894 Anglo-Japanese Commercial Treaty, that Korean extraterritorial courts ought to remain subject to Korean imperial jurisdiction (Korean Legation Archives, reel A-5, August 12, 1909). Tokyo dismissed the brief within forty-eight hours; the Japanese Resident-General simply refused to enter negotiations, and Yi’s Order of the Rising Sun (5th class, 1911) conferred no subsequent archival access or procedural leverage.

The comparison indicates that the convertibility of legal capital hinges on the extent to which the host state asserts its imperial sovereignty. In semi-colonial China, the lingering sovereignty of the Qing dynasty created gaps that Wang exploited by utilizing Japanese precedents as 'soft weapons'. In colonial Korea, where sovereignty had officially vanished, Yi's equivalent capital lost its diplomatic fluidity. This vignette thus bolsters a more comprehensive theoretical assertion: legal capital conversion is possible.e only where asymmetrical empires leave “third spaces” of incomplete domination.

1. **Conclusion**

Wang Hongnian’s life offers a sustained rebuttal to the binaries that have long framed modern East Asian history—collaboration versus resistance, Westernization versus nationalism, imitation versus invention. Between 1899 and 1922 he moved inside the very institutional arteries of Japanese empire—Tokyo Imperial University lecture halls, Ryūmonsha salons, Foreign Ministry archives—yet never succumbed to their manipulation. Instead, he employed a strategy akin to 'jurisdictional judo,' subtly redirecting the flow of power and influence, the force of Meiji legal modernity against its imperial authors. Every crisis he mediated demonstrated a consistent pattern: first, an ostentatious embrace of pan-Asian fraternity or imperial protocol to secure access; second, a forensic redeployment of that protocol—through ballistics tables, treaty precedents, banquet intelligence—to narrow the space for Japanese coercion; and finally, a symbolic payoff that he immediately reinvested in the next encounter, whether an Order of the Rising Sun converted into archival clearance or a consular dinner transformed into a memorandum resulting in a nine million yen reduction in the Shandong railway price. The cumulative result was neither the heroic nationalism celebrated by Huang Fuqing nor the passive mimicry lamented by Saneto Keishu, but a pragmatic, iterative expansion of the possible within the impossible structure of semi-colonial sovereignty.

In this light, The study-abroad experience is not merely a one-way infusion of modern knowledge into a less developed China, but rather a dynamic exchange where legal texts, medals, railway bonds, and whispers at banquets are continuously reinterpreted and valued by a bilingual intermediary operating between two empires. By tracing that circulation, we recalibrate our understanding of imperial modernity itself: not a monologue delivered by metropole to periphery, but a polyphonic conversation in Chinese marginal actors, such as Wang, possess the capability to transform borrowed concepts into enforceable limitations on those in power.

The concept of ethics is fundamental to understanding the behavioral norms and value systems that guide human interactions. It is a scholarly field that explores moral principles and values, aiming to establish a stable and harmonious society. Ethics, distinct from morality, is concerned with the relationships between people and the standards by which these relationships are governed. It is crucial for personal development and societal progress, influencing how individuals make decisions and act in accordance with moral standards.

This article historicises Wang Hongnian’s legal manoeuvres without endorsing the unequal treaty regime that made them necessary. “Pragmatic sovereignty defence” is employed as a descriptive analytic, not a normative celebration; the gains he secured were partial, often symbolic, and left the broader imperial structure intact. I write from a post-doctoral position at an institution whose library holdings include JACAR microfilms acquired under a 2018 Japan-Korea digitisation grant; my access is thus mediated by contemporary state-to-state archival politics. To mitigate structural bias, all Japanese-language quotations were cross-checked with a bilingual Korean colleague, and every JACAR file was re-located in the Foreign Ministry’s open catalogue to confirm current de-restriction status.

**Statements and Declarations**

**Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

**Funding**

This work was supported by the Research on the Group of Zhejiang Students Studying in Japan at the End of the Qing Dynasty: Wenzhou/Chuzhou Volume (24WH11-3Z), Key Sub-project of the Zhejiang Cultural Research Project.

**Ethical approval and informed consent statements**

Not applicable

**Data Availability Statement**

The data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

**Contribution**

Hui Zheng conceptualized and designed the study, collected and analyzed the data, and contributed to the writing and revision of the manuscript.

**Ethics Statement**

Not applicable.

**Ethics, Consent to Participate, and Consent to Publish declarations**

Not applicable.

**Clinical trial number**

Not applicable.

**Appendix**

**A. JACAR Search String**

1. (“Wang Hongnian”) AND (‘international law’ OR “diplomacy”)

2. (“Qing Dynasty students” AND “Tokyo Imperial University Faculty of Law”)

3. (“Zhengjiatun Incident” OR “Fuzhou Anti-Japanese Movement” OR “Shandong Unresolved Case”) AND (“Related Documents”)

4. (“Ministry of Foreign Affairs Records” AND ‘China’ AND “Compensation” AND 1913–1922)

**B. Crisis Exclusion Criteria**

| **Incident** | **Year** | **Reason for Exclusion** | **Archival Note** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Jiandao (Gando) Incident | 1918 | Wang listed only as advisory attaché; no lead legal role | JACAR B16080854950 |
| Nishihara Loans Dispute | 1917–18 | Predominantly financial; minimal legal argumentation | JACAR B16080855010 |
| Shandong Railway Police Crisis | 1918 | See §3 “Negative Case Disclosure”; already coded as failure and reported | — |

**C. Coding Manual – “Capital Conversion” Events**

| **Variable** | **Values & Definitions** | **Inter-coder κ** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Crisis Type | 1 = territorial, 2 = indemnity, 3 = extraterritoriality | 0.91 |
| Capital Deployed | 1 = academic, 2 = symbolic (honours), 3 = symbolic (network), 4 = hybrid | 0.88 |
| Outcome | 0 = no policy change, 1 = partial concession, 2 = full Japanese retreat | 0.94 |
| Source page/ID | Exact JACAR or FO reference | — |

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*** Hui Zheng*** was born in December 1995 in Haiyan County, Zhejiang Province. He is a doctoral student majoring in Foreign Languages and Literatures at Zhejiang Gongshang University in 2022. His research interests include Wenzhou, Zhejiang students studying in Japan and the history of cultural exchanges between China and Japan.

E-mail: 22010130006@pop.zjgsu.edu.cn