

# **Presentations**

# Japan's Southward Advance and Intelligence in 1941

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## Introduction

It seems to me that a rather stereotypical view of Japan's information warfare has become commonplace. The idea has been spreading that the Pacific War, which resulted in Japan's disastrous defeat, ended the way it did because Japan was overwhelmed in terms of both "hard" (material) and "soft" (operational) power. In particular, regarding Japanese intelligence, there is a persistent image, similar to *nihonbunkaron* (theories on Japanese uniqueness), that the Japanese people are "information illiterate." For example, it is likely that a significant percentage of the Japanese population truly believes the Pearl Harbor conspiracy theory that President Roosevelt had prior knowledge about the attack on Pearl Harbor. We researchers are making efforts to correct such images from an empirical standpoint, but I feel that our efforts have been falling short. Many years ago at an academic conference, Hiromi Tanaka, then professor of the National Defense Academy of Japan, asked the question: "Who knew more about the other side before the war, Japan or the United States?" Considering the relative significance of the United States to Japan and Japan to the United States, common sense would dictate that Japan naturally knew more about the United States than vice versa. The answer should have been obvious, considering that the United States began studying Japan in a panic only after being attacked by Japan, but at the time, the question caught me somewhat off guard. This image of Japan has become so fixed that it is difficult to make such common-sense judgments. As if to echo Edward Said's point in *Orientalism*,<sup>1</sup> the subject is always the West, while Japan tends to be portrayed as an object of manipulation, stripped of its subjectivity. Since we are researchers, in our research we always maintain the perspective of which side had the upper hand at any given stage in the timeline and to what extent. However, such detailed and complicated explanations are difficult to propagate among the general population.

Now, it is well known that in the events leading up to the outbreak of war between Japan and the United States, the United States decrypted Japan's diplomatic codes and made use of this information, which they called MAGIC. Former Secretary of State Cordell Hull's memoirs<sup>2</sup> were translated into Japanese shortly after they were published in English and are still in print today. The telegrams decrypted by the United States were included in the *Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack*,<sup>3</sup> a report of the Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack issued immediately after the war. In Japan, parts of this report were translated in *Gendaishi shiryō 34 Taiheiyōsensō 1* [Contemporary history archive 34: The Pacific War

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<sup>1</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, Routledge, 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Cordell Hull, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, The Macmillan Company, 1948.

<sup>3</sup> Joint Committee on the Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack, *Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack*, 1946.

1]<sup>4</sup> published by Misuzu Shobo. This archive includes commentary by former naval captain Sanematsu Yuzuru, who was an assistant attaché to the Japanese embassy in Washington, D.C. right before the outbreak of the war, and he describes the archive as “nothing less than a ‘record of complete victory’ for the U.S. side and a ‘record of utter defeat’ for the Japanese side.”<sup>5</sup> However, I fail to understand on what basis Sanematsu has determined either side to be a winner or loser. If it were simply a matter of the superiority or inferiority of each side’s cryptanalysis capabilities, the Japanese side was also decrypting the U.S. Department of State’s most secure coded telegrams,<sup>6</sup> so the two sides were almost evenly matched in this respect. For example, if the United States had been able to detect Japan’s next moves by decrypting their telegrams and responded effectively, as they did when they reduced Japan’s capital ships ratio from 70 percent to 60 percent of U.S. naval tonnage with the Washington Naval Treaty, then the United States would have been the winner in this code battle. However, as you know, Pearl Harbor was a surprise attack, and the Southeast Asian colonies of the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands were all invaded by Japan. This can hardly be called a clear victory for the United States. We must still examine how the decrypted telegrams were used in the context of the policymaking process. In addition, it has long been noted that MAGIC was subject to many mistranslations during the process of converting this information into English.<sup>7</sup> Today, we will examine how the United States viewed Japan’s southward advance policy through the lens of such decrypted information.

### **The Policymaking System and Japan’s Southward Advance Policy**

The trouble for researchers is that the policymaking system in Japan during the period in question was extremely complex. First, let’s begin with a broad overview of how foreign policy decisions were made. The Meiji constitutional system was a system in which both the Cabinet and the General Staff (the general staffs of the Army and Navy) supported the emperor side by side, as shown in Figure 1,<sup>8</sup> so that the Prime Minister had no leadership authority. The Cabinet was a weak institution that was unable to make a decision when even one member disagreed, and if it failed to pass a resolution, the entire Cabinet was forced to resign. At the time, the government and the General Staff held regular meetings of the Liaison Conference of the Imperial General Headquarters and Government (*Daihon’ei Seifu Renraku Kondankai* from November 1940; renamed the *Daihon’ei Seifu Renraku Kaigi* in July 1941), where many “national policies” were decided, but many of these policies were incomprehensible. The conference produced a parade of documents that were difficult to understand on first reading, with contradictory sentences (including both sides of the argument) and long-winded

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<sup>4</sup> Sanematsu Yuzuru, ed., Misuzu Shobo, 1968.

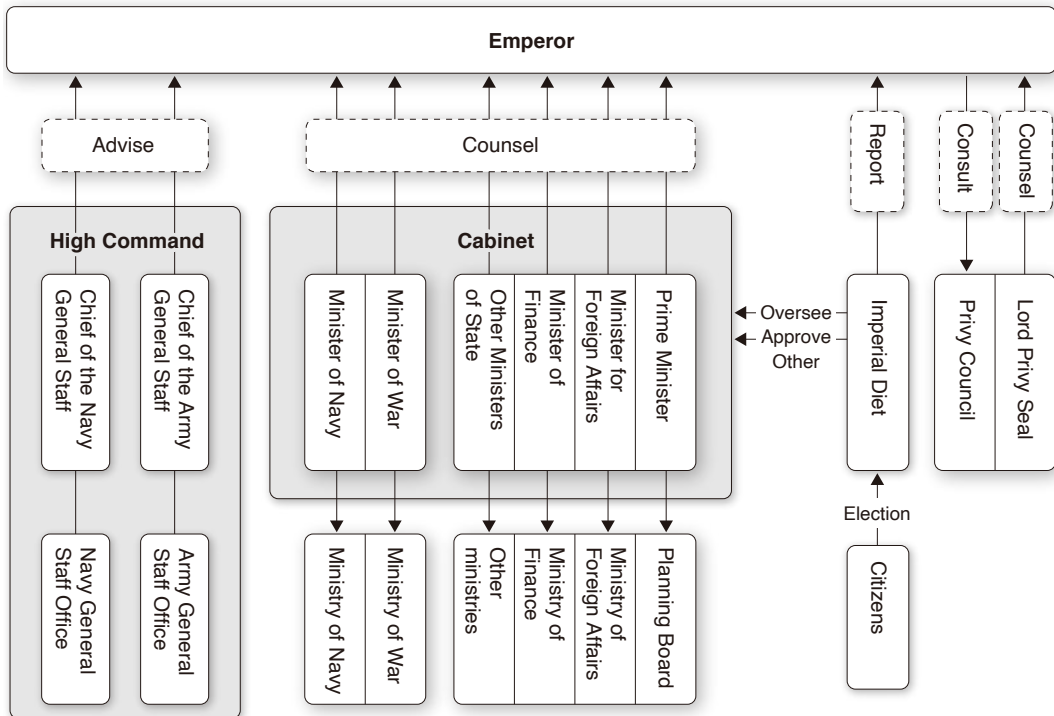
<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Moriyama Atsushi, “Senzenki ni okeru Nippon no angō kaidokunōryoku ni kansuru kiso kenkyō [The Basic Study about the Ability of Japanese Signals Intelligence in 1941],” *Journal of International Relations and Comparative Culture*, 3-1, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Nishi Haruhiko, *Kaisō no Nihon gaikō* [Japanese diplomacy in retrospect], Iwanami Shoten, 1965.

<sup>8</sup> Moriyama Atsushi, *Nihon wa naze kaisen ni fumikittaka* [Why Japan decided to enter the war with the U.S.], Shinchosha, 2012.

sentences that delayed getting to the point (nondecision or decision avoidance), to ensure that there would be no dissenters.<sup>9</sup> At the meetings, Foreign Minister Matsuoka Yosuke changed his argument every time in order to manipulate the Army and Navy.<sup>10</sup>



\*Each ministry is directly subordinate to the Emperor. Ministers of State direct and oversee their respective ministries as chief administrators by delegation of the Emperor.

Figure 1: Political system under the Meiji Constitution (Conceptual diagram)

Fearing war with Britain and the United States, the Army and Navy were seeking to advance southward as far as possible while avoiding decisive confrontation with the two countries. Matsuoka, as if seeing through this, advocated a Singapore invasion and used “internal diplomacy” to make the Army and Navy, which were not prepared to go that far, play the role of the holdout. At the end of 1940, Thailand launched an attack to regain the territories it had lost to French Indochina. Japan began to mediate, but momentum was building in the Army and Navy to take advantage of this opportunity to form a military alliance with Thailand and set up bases in southern Indochina. Based on a variety of intelligence sources, including cryptanalysis, the Army and Navy had determined that as long as Japan did not

<sup>9</sup> Moriyama, *Nichibei kaisen no seiji katei* [Political process of Japan's decision making for the U.S.-Japan War], Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1998; On-demand edition, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Moriyama, *Nichibei kaisen to jōhōsen* [Intelligence war before the Japan-U.S. War 1941], Kodansha, 2016.

meddle with British territory or the Dutch East Indies, they would be able to avoid decisive confrontation with Britain and the United States. The Army and Navy, frustrated by the foreign minister's inability to reach an agreement on mediation negotiations, incorporated the above in the "national policy" in order to achieve their goals, even if it meant using military force. However, Matsuoka did not enter into negotiations with French Indochina or Thailand once the mediation was concluded, but instead quickly left for a visit to Europe (on his way back, he would conclude the Soviet-Japanese Neutrality Pact).

Discussion of stationing troops in southern French Indochina was revived in early June 1941, shortly after June 5, the day information was received that Germany was about to invade the Soviet Union. When the Army and Navy urged Matsuoka to strengthen relations with Thailand and French Indochina as soon as possible, he rejected the idea, saying, "As long as there is no plan to capture Singapore, I won't take a single step towards a military agreement."<sup>11</sup> The Army and Navy, provoked by Matsuoka, proposed a plan to advance into southern French Indochina that included the readiness to fight against Britain and the United States. In addition, when the war between Germany and the Soviet Union began on June 22, the doctrine that Japan should beat the Soviet forces in the Far East (*hokushin-ron*) in a show of support to Germany emerged mainly from the General Staff Office of the Army. The "national policy" decided under these circumstances was the Outline of the Imperial National Policy in View of the Change of Circumstances adopted at the Imperial Conference on July 2.<sup>12</sup>

### **Southward Advance? / Northward Advance?: Japan's Incomprehensible "National Policy"**

Since the Army was an organization whose first priority at all times was to overthrow the Soviet Union, it insisted, with varying degrees of intensity, on northward advance. That did not mean that it was opposed to southward advance; it was in favor of the default policy of southward advance (strengthening relations with Thailand and French Indochina). The Navy was adamantly opposed to a northward advance that would only lead to a war of attrition. However, Foreign Minister Matsuoka, who had previously advocated a Singapore invasion, suddenly began to advocate the northward advance doctrine.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, although this "national policy" opened the "Policy" section with the slogan "Build the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," it more specifically stated not just two, but actually three policies at the same time: resolution of the Sino-Japanese War, southward advance to establish bases for self-defense, and resolution of the northern issue according to circumstances. The "Outline" section included the hardline phrase, "Do not shrink from war against Britain and the United States,"<sup>14</sup> but this was a bluff to persuade Matsuoka. Most of the Army and Navy, except for a few hardliners, were not prepared for war against Britain and the United States. As for the war between Germany and the Soviet Union, it stated that preparations were to be made, but the decision to enter the war would be

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<sup>11</sup> The Military History Society of Japan, ed., *Daihon'ei rikugunbu sensō shidōhan kimitsu sensō nisshi Vol. 1* [The secret war diary of the War Guidance Team, Army Section, Imperial General Headquarters], Kinseisha, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Imperial Japanese Army General Staff Office, ed., *Sugiyama Memo Vol. 1*, Hara Shobo, 1967.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Moriyama, 1998; Moriyama, 2016.

left to each to decide; if Japan did enter the war, it would only be to the extent that it did not interfere with the war against Britain and the United States; and if the United States entered the war in Europe, Japan would act based on the Tripartite Pact, but the use of force would be at Japan's own discretion. All in all, it was a non-committal decision to defer decision. At the end of the document was the standard "national policy" statement: "Specific measures shall be determined separately." It would have been impossible to read this and know exactly what Japan intended to do. Considering the situation one month later, we could say that this was the last "national policy" that allowed Japan to dream of an optimistic future.

### **The "National Policy" Goes Haywire**

It is understood that the "national policy" was a top secret of the state. Matsuoka, however, circulated this document by telegram to embassies abroad.<sup>15</sup> Of course, radical language such as "Do not shrink from war against Britain and the United States" was removed, and the text was strictly encrypted. What is puzzling, however, is that Japan received warnings from Germany that their codes were being decrypted,<sup>16</sup> and there is testimony that Matsuoka was aware of the decryption.<sup>17</sup> By a stretch of imagination, it is possible to conceive that Matsuoka may have hoped to trigger some effect by daring to have the "national policy" read by the British and Americans. Since the text of the telegram as it was typed does not remain in Japan, comparing the original document with the messages decrypted by the United States and Britain<sup>18</sup> reveals some differences. First, the document was simplified by deleting from the "Policy" section the parts about resolving the Sino-Japanese War and the use of force against the Soviet Union, i.e., northward advance, leaving only the part about southward advance for the sake of self-defense. However, three directions were stated in the "Outline" section: strengthening pressure on the Chiang Kai-shek administration, implementing the default policy towards French Indochina and Thailand, and preparing for and voluntarily entering the war in the north. Compared to the original document, the decrypted "Policy" focused more on Japan's southward advance, but its contents were disjointed.

This "national policy" has been used until now as a prime example of information that had a major influence on the United States. It is listed at the top of various telegrams in the aforementioned *Investigation of the Pearl Harbor Attack*, and is also mentioned in Hull's memoirs<sup>19</sup> and H. Feis's *The Road to Pearl Harbor*<sup>20</sup> as evidence that the United States was aware in real time of Japanese intentions to advance southward. However, taking a closer look at the decrypted text, we see that the decryption date was not immediately after interception, but one month later, on August 10 (August 12 for Britain). Both Britain and the United States have recorded that the text was heavily encrypted, and when viewed in light of the fact that

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<sup>15</sup> Circular Telegram No. 1390 from Tokyo, Sanematsu, ed., 1968.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Harris, "The 'Magic' Leak of 1941 and Japanese-American Relations," *PACIFIC HISTORICAL REVIEW*, 1981.

<sup>17</sup> Ohashi Chuichi, *Taiheiyō sensō yuraiki* [Origin of the Pacific War], Kaname Shobo, 1952.

<sup>18</sup> Original text: SRDJ013864, NARA (United States); HW12/267, TNA (United Kingdom).

<sup>19</sup> Hull, 1949.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert Feis, *The Road to Pearl Harbor*, Princeton University Press, 1950.

decryption usually took two or three days, we can see that it took a great deal of effort for them to decrypt the text. Secretary of State Hull stated that he had grasped Japan's intentions when he read the decrypted text of this "national policy," but if Hull's statement is correct that the United States turned to adopting hardline measures against Japan in early July, it was not this "national policy" but some other telegrams that were the cause. These are thought to be the telegrams (No. 584, No. 585) sent by Foreign Minister Matsuoka to Japanese ambassador to Germany Oshima Hiroshi on July 1, just prior to the "national policy" decision, to be conveyed to Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop. This document was written in English, so mistranslation was not an issue. Even so, it is clear from the U.S. response that Japanese intentions were not read at all.

For what purpose was this message sent? Germany had long requested Japan's participation in the war against the Soviet Union. Matsuoka emphasized in these telegrams that since Japan was preparing for war against the Soviet Union and strengthening its pressure on Britain and the United States by acquiring military bases in French Indochina, this diversion amounted to no less than intervention in the German-Soviet war. He concluded by saying that he was certain that Germany and Italy would win the war. In essence, he was evading the issue by saying that Japan was already contributing so much and had no intention of entering the war immediately. However, after reading this, on July 4, U.S. Army Chief of Staff George Marshall tried to fly a liaison plane to pass the information on to Secretary of War Henry Stimson, who had returned to his home in New York.<sup>21</sup> Although bad weather prevented the plane from flying, Stimson was shown the telegram the next day, and he immediately met with President Franklin D. Roosevelt to inform him of its content. Stimson had already been skeptical of the U.S.-Japan negotiations that Hull was involved in, and Roosevelt at this time agreed with Stimson that the information "had better signalize the end of our efforts of appeasement in the Pacific." Stimson's interpretation, as he told Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, was that "Tokyo and Berlin in jubilation over how they were fooling us in the Pacific." Knox, who had long wanted to bring the Pearl Harbor fleet to the Atlantic, advised the president to do so. However, Hull's efforts to persuade the president may have been successful; the embargo and other hardline measures and the relocation of the fleet did not take place this time. This is just one episode that reveals the United States' perception of Japan, but it is also a good example of the dangers involved when policymakers have access to raw information before it becomes intelligence.

### **Deterioration of the United States' Perception of Japan due to MAGIC Information**

At the end of July, in retaliation for the Japanese stationing troops in southern French Indochina, the United States froze Japanese assets in the United States and imposed an oil export licensing system, followed by an embargo on aircraft gasoline and lubricating oil on August 1. Licenses for oil exports were issued, but no method of settlement was indicated, resulting in a de facto embargo on oil to Japan. Japan explained to the United States that its advance into southern French Indochina was to be conducted strictly in a peaceful manner and that there would be no further southward expansion. However, for the U.S. side, which

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<sup>21</sup> *Diaries of Henry Lewis Stimson*, Yale University Library, 1973.

believed that Japan and Germany were working together as one, this explanation was a sign of Japanese double-dealing, and it instead aroused distrust. Feis, quoting a telegram sent by Foreign Minister Toyoda Teijirō to Ōshima, ambassador to Germany (Telegram No. 708, forwarded to Washington), wrote, "How could a man have much hope?" and took the position that the decrypted telegram was the cause of hardening measures against Japan.<sup>22</sup> In fact, on August 8, Stimson "had brought with me the last magics that I had received which gave a very recent example of Japan's duplicity" and showed it to Secretary of State Hull. Hull is reported to have said, "We have reached the end of any possible appeasement with Japan and that there is nothing further that can be done with that country except by a firm policy and, he expected, force itself."<sup>23</sup> It can be assumed that the MAGIC information that he brought with him at this time included Telegram No. 708, but what information did it contain? Feis quotes a passage which states that Japan conducted the invasion of southern French Indochina because of increasingly strained trade and economic relations with the United States and Britain and in order to smash through the strengthening iron chain encircling Japan, but if we read the entire four-part telegram, this is only scratching the surface. As with the earlier July 1 telegram, the message of the telegram as a whole was an appeal to reject Germany's request for Japan to enter the war against the Soviet Union and to seek Germany's understanding for the Japan-U.S. negotiations. Furthermore, the telegram goes as far as to accuse Germany of "start a war with Russia because of her own military expediency when it was least desirable on our part." From statements such as "real cooperation does not necessarily mean complete symmetry of action," and "during this dire emergency is certainly no time to engage in any light unpremeditated or over-speedy action,"<sup>24</sup> it should have been obvious that unity between Japan and Germany was nothing more than an illusion, but these were overlooked by Stimson and the others.

### **The Failure to Hold the Japan-U.S. Summit Meeting**

In order to defuse the teetering relations between Japan and the United States, Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro proposed a Japan-U.S. Summit Meeting. This was a revolutionary concept that overcame a weakness in Japan's policymaking system. The plan was to contact the emperor as soon as a compromise was reached and issue an imperial edict to suppress any opposition. The question was whether or not the United States would come on board. Ultimately, a Summit Meeting did not take place, and the reasons for this have been suggested to include Hull's reluctance and the opposition of hardliners against Japan. Since diplomatic negotiations are based on the existence of a relationship of trust, we can point to the existence of MAGIC information as one of the causes for the underlying distrust of the United States towards Japan. On August 8, Nomura Kichisaburo, ambassador to the United States, proposed the Summit Meeting to Secretary of State Hull, and it was on this very day that the aforementioned Outline of the Imperial National Policy in View of the Change of Circumstances was finally decrypted. The next day, on August 9, Stimson obtained the decrypted text and immediately called Hull

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<sup>22</sup> Feis, 1956.

<sup>23</sup> Stimson, 1973.

<sup>24</sup> Sanematsu, ed., 1968.



to check whether he had obtained it. Stimson wrote, “It was another example of Japanese duplicity. They are trying now to get up a conference between Prime Minister Konoye and President Roosevelt with on a most engaging program of peace while at the same time they are carrying on a negotiations with their ambassadors throughout the world [omitted] that they have already made up their mind to a policy of going south expansion through French Indochina and Thailand. The invitation to the President is merely a blind to try to keep us from taking definite action.”<sup>25</sup> As mentioned earlier, we do not know what Matsuoka’s intention was in distributing the “national policy” to the overseas diplomatic missions, but at the critical juncture of the proposed Japan-U.S. Summit Meeting, the month-old “national policy” exploded like a ticking time bomb. It was truly the worst possible timing.

### **In Conclusion**

Thus far, we have examined how MAGIC information was received, mainly from Stimson’s Diary. We can therefore say that MAGIC information had a certain effect in amplifying the distrust of the United States towards Japan and hardening its policy towards Japan. One of the reasons why this functioned to reinforce misunderstandings and prejudices rather than to resolve them is largely due to the fact that policymakers had direct access to the information as raw material before it was processed into intelligence. Furthermore, their prejudice was amplified by their assumption that the decrypted telegrams concealed Japan’s true intentions. While Japan believed that it could strike a balance between the Axis route and negotiations with the United States, it was a matter of one or the other for the United States, and Japan’s words and actions were seen as double-dealing. Of course, whether or not there were intelligence officers in the United States and Britain at that time who could have understood Japan’s cultural background and sublimate that information into intelligence is another matter.

Unfortunately for Japan, their prejudice became reality through Japan’s own subsequent actions. This put the possibility of avoiding war, which existed at the time, in the background, and it all boiled down to a simple story of Japan steadily planning and executing a war of aggression. What’s more, American prejudices and fallacies have gained a place in the official history.

Who, then, had the most accurate grasp of the situation at the time? In Japan, Shidehara Kijuro is a good example. He was told by Konoe that Japan would advance into southern French Indochina, and he appealed to Konoe to stop the operation because of the danger of war.<sup>26</sup> At the time, unlike the military and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Shidehara must not have had access to British and American decrypted information (SIGINT). What about in Britain and the United States? The British and U.S. ambassadors to Japan, Robert Craigie and Joseph Grew, frequently advised their home countries about Japan’s enthusiasm for U.S.-Japan negotiations. They too were kept away from decrypted information. In other words, those who were basing their decisions on open-source intelligence (OSINT), such as Shidehara, Craigie, and Grew, had a more accurate picture of the situation. This is a case study not to be missed when considering the meaning of information in history.

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<sup>25</sup> Stimson, 1973.

<sup>26</sup> Shidehara Kijuro, *Gaikō gojūnen* [Fifty years of diplomacy], The Yomiuri Shimbun, 1951.