On the evening of March 11, 1919, a minor scuffle broke out between a handful of plain-clothed Japanese police officers and U.S. Army personnel outside a Korean brothel in the Japanese concession zone of Tianjin, China. According to U.S. sources, the violence escalated at around midnight the next evening, when “a large group of excited Japanese civilians carrying clubs and pistols invaded the French concession.” Following the mob into the French concession, “the acting Japanese consul, mounted on a horse, led a body of more than one hundred Japanese troops and officers armed with rifles with fixed bayonets.”¹ In the ensuing melee, two American soldiers found themselves in the custody of Japanese consular police forces. One had been struck on the head by a Japanese soldier outside the Empire Cinema, a local movie house in the French concession, and then transported to the Japanese consular police station, during which time a Japanese mob thrashed him with sticks. The second had been overwhelmed, while trying to escape, still half-dressed, from a Chinese brothel in the French concession, by a mob of close to sixty Japanese civilians who beat him severely. After taking him into their custody, a small band of Japanese soldiers later delivered him to the Japanese consular police station too.²

A pair of American military officers soon arrived at the Japanese consulate and demanded that any Americans being held in the jail be released immediately, but the Japanese police chief refused to take any action. Japanese consul Kamei Kanichirō further explained that he could not do anything before consulting with his American counterpart, Consul Stewart P. Heintzleman. By the time Heintzleman arrived, however, Kamei had already gone home. When Heintzleman nonetheless inquired as to the whereabouts of the two American soldiers, consular police chief Kaneko denied that any Americans were being held in his facility. Moments later, however, no doubt much to Kaneko’s chagrin, one of the Americans who had accompanied Heintzleman “discovered Corporal Rohner lying almost stark naked in a side courtyard” bleeding severely from several bayonet wounds to his back, and “a search of the place resulted in the discovery of Corporal DeCordova in a cell. In the office of the chief of police was found the hat of Corporal DeCordova and the clothes of Corporal Rohner.” The two men were then released into Heintzleman’s custody, and the remnants of the Japanese mob stoned the American consul’s car as it drove off.³
Numerous dimensions of treaty port life in early Republican China are revealed in the episode described above. It is, for instance, a vivid portrait of an international and multicultural urban milieu in which American soldiers visiting Korean brothels in the Japanese ward of a Chinese city could be chased down Asahi-gai until it became rue de Chalyard, and then beaten outside a movie house in the French concession, where Vietnamese patrolmen of the French police force finally cleared the crowd. It is also indicative of how simmering tensions among the civilian residents, government officials, and military forces of each national group could quite easily erupt into outbursts of violence. One of the most striking images, however, is that of a Japanese consul on horseback boldly leading a contingent of soldiers and police officers down an avenue ostensibly to protect Japanese residents of the city from attack by American soldiers. Who were these police forces that operated out of the Japanese consulate in Tianjin? On what legal basis did the Japanese Foreign Ministry establish such a security force? On what legal authority did these police believe they could arrest, detain, and physically abuse U.S. military personnel within the confines of the politically exclusive French settlement? It was with questions such as these that the research leading to this book first began.

What that research revealed was a story of roughly sixty-five years during which the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Gaimushô) maintained an independent police force within the space of Japan’s informal empire on the Asian continent rooted in a controversial interpretation of extraterritorial privilege. Justified as a logical and legitimate corollary of treaty agreements with Korea and China, and charged with a duty to “protect and control” civilian Japanese communities on the Asian mainland, this Japanese consular police force possesses the longest uninterrupted history of any Japanese colonial institution. The opening anecdote may give the impression that these consular policemen did little more than help keep the peace within the volatile urban setting of the foreign concession zones, and that in doing so they were often at the center of local jurisdictional conflicts with the other foreign powers in treaty port China. The Foreign Ministry’s police force in continental East Asia, however, evolved over the course of those six decades from a relatively benign public security organization into a full-fledged political intelligence apparatus devoted to apprehending Korean, Chinese, and Japanese purveyors of “dangerous thought” throughout the empire. Consequently, its history principally concerns the course and character of interactions between the societies of East Asia, and as such, it sheds critical light on the broader politics of public memory, colonial victimization, and war responsibility that have such a powerful impact on international relations in East Asia today.

In his description of the Japanese presence in China’s treaty port communities, one scholar has identified the police forces maintained by Japan’s
consulate offices as “the largest and, to the Chinese, the most outrageously provocative of all the foreign gendarmeries.” Similarly, another has remarked that, of all Japan’s armed fists, “at least before the Manchurian Incident, it was the consular police who were singled out by the Chinese for the greatest condemnation.” It is remarkable indeed, then, that so little is known about a Japanese police force that many contemporary Koreans and Chinese (and Japanese!) viewed as one of the most odious tools of Japanese state oppression during the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, statistics reveal in no uncertain terms that Japan’s consular system, and even the Foreign Ministry itself, was largely defined during the prewar and wartime eras by its role as an institution designed to exercise functions of both social management and ideological control. From 1922 on, for example, consular police officers comprised no less than 40 percent of all Foreign Ministry employees. By 1933, that percentage had climbed to as high as 62 percent. When one looks at the numbers of Foreign Ministry staff stationed in overseas facilities, the statistics are even more striking. In 1921, for example, 560 of 1,133 Foreign Ministry personnel overseas were police officers, roughly 49 percent. By 1936, the ratio climbed as high as 1,794 of 2,557, or just over 70 percent. Obviously, then, the Japanese Foreign Ministry police was an institution whose history should no longer be overlooked. While a handful of East Asian historians have made initial forays into the topic, even with these valuable works our understanding of what part Japan’s consular police played in shaping the Japanese colonial presence in northeast Asia is minimal. The present study is the first in English to fill that void, and in telling the story of how the Japanese Foreign Ministry crossed the edge of empire through the actions of its consular police forces this book challenges a number of deeply ingrained paradigms related to Japanese colonial expansionism.

The dramatic events of September 18, 1931, when rogue agents of the Japanese military in China blew up a section of railway near Fengtian and then used the staged explosion as a pretext for the occupation by force of south Manchuria, occupies a prominent space in popular historical memory both within and beyond East Asian society. It is most often remembered as the moment at which the wild imaginings of Kwantung Army general Ishiwara Kanji and his ultranationalist cronies hijacked the direction of an otherwise liberal Japanese interwar foreign policy. Internationally, diplomats in Tokyo, confounded by a military fait accompli, had little choice but to acquiesce to army interests, since failure to do so would reveal to the world that Japan’s civilian government had almost no capacity to rein in its own military forces in the field. While on some levels this narrative does reflect historical reality, in painting a picture of indisputable villains and victims it is also a view of history inextricably informed by the need to advance a certain narrative of prewar Japanese politics that would
both vindicate American destruction of that polity and exonerate “ordinary” Japanese from responsibility for that destruction.

The research of professional historians evaluating these events some thirty years later often substantiated and reflected this narrative in which Japan’s peaceful internationalism of the Taishō era was violently usurped by the aggressive militarism of the early Shōwa period. The notion that the contest between the Foreign Ministry and the Imperial Army was some kind of Manichean struggle between the forces of dark conquest and liberal accommodation, however, is no longer widely accepted. Historians studying specifically the inner workings of the Japanese Foreign Ministry, for example, have done much to reveal the great diversity of views within its many levels of bureaucracy. Furthermore, others have pointed out, in exposing the Machiavellian stratagems of many interwar diplomats, that “Antimilitarism did not necessarily imply opposition to military intervention and aggression, or resistance to the diplomacy of fait accompli.” Despite these developments in the historiography, however, the Gaimushō is still often characterized as an advocate of “liberal” or “progressive” approaches to international relations in contradistinction to the Imperial Army, which was driven by unilateral security prerogatives and reckless ideological ambition. In that narrative, the Manchurian Incident of 1931 especially stands as a watershed moment in modern East Asian history when Japan returned to a policy of acquiring formal colonial territory. As one preeminent scholar has put it, “just when Japan appeared to be emerging as the paramount foreign economic power in China within the framework of the treaty system, it embarked on a new policy of establishing direct political control over Manchuria” in the late summer of 1931. Even in deemphasizing the drama of the Manchurian Incident by describing it as a “shift in the equilibrium of an existing dualism rather than a revolutionary break,” other analyses of the Japanese Foreign Ministry in the pre-war state still seem trapped in a paradigm of dualism.

To understand fully the complicity of the Foreign Ministry in the structures of Japanese imperialism demands more than mere recognition of internal factionalism within its bureaucracy, the opportunistic realism of its diplomatic agents, or its jurisdictional battles with other arms of the Japanese imperial state. What the history of the Japanese consular police reveals is that at the local level in continental East Asia the Foreign Ministry did not only react passively to the proactive initiatives of other imperial agencies but, rather, actively promoted colonial expansionism in accordance with its perceived political security prerogatives. For more than a decade before the Kwantung Army launched its unilateral campaign to defend Japan’s geopolitical security in 1931, the Foreign Ministry had been engaged in a war of its own against radical Korean nationalists operating in exile in treaty port China and through-
out Manchuria. Those nationalists had taken their struggle against formal empire to battlefields in the informal empire, and when Japanese police of the formal colonies could not fight them there, the Japanese consular police took up the cause. Furthermore, just as the emergence of international communism sparked efforts by civil and judicial authorities at home to crush nascent left-wing movements in Japan proper, so the Foreign Ministry took on the same task throughout northeast Asia and pursued that aim as well through its consular police forces.

The history of the consular police thus suggests that the piecemeal encroachment by Japanese authorities upon Chinese sovereignty during the interwar years was not only the consequence of the clashing interests of Chinese nationalism and Japanese empire building. It was also a manifestation of political and ideological conflict within metropolitan Japanese society during the 1920s. The struggle between conservative state authority and liberal social forces—a struggle in which the metropolitan police performed the most significant coercive functions of state power—was also played out in the colonial periphery, where the consular police became the imperial state’s armed fist within noncolonial space and systematically targeted for suppression any individual or organization engaged in activity deemed hostile to the empire/nation. The sustained campaign by Japanese consular police forces in China and Manchuria to snuff out Korean resistance was more than a mere counterinsurgency program. When viewed alongside the Foreign Ministry’s concomitant efforts to police Japanese leftists in China, it can be understood as one part of a larger state-organized policy aimed at crushing ideological threats to the kokutai (national polity), colonial or metropolitan.¹⁴

This is significant, because historians of Japanese foreign relations during the first half of the twentieth century often fail to recognize the interconnectivity of foreign policy and domestic society as an operative force in Japanese social and political life. As one critic has recently suggested, most work on Japanese imperialism “splits the narrative of modern Japan into two solitudes—the first, a domestic history untainted by interactions with the continent, and the second, a history of the colonies penetrated by the forces of the metropolis.”¹⁵ The problem with this approach is that in such metrocentric history “the transnational processes inherent to empire are truncated, reinforcing assumptions about national subjectivity and ensuring that history remains in service to the nation.”¹⁶ Scholars of European colonialism have for many years now been engaged in the sort of research that breaks these state-centered boundaries.¹⁷ Fortunately, recent years have also seen the production of several studies that begin to integrate the colonial and metropolitan history of modern Japanese society in meaningful and important ways, but much more still needs to be done.¹⁸

The work of intellectual, social, and labor historians of modern Japan
during the past twenty years has pointed the way forward in this respect by reframing domestic history in terms that transcend the simplistic dualism of a helpless society victimized by an oppressive state. More specifically, scholarship has come to emphasize the need to appreciate the subtle negotiation and collaboration between social groups and state power, rather than accept a one-dimensional portrait of popular victimization by an authoritarian government and its bureaucracies.\(^{19}\) As Sheldon Garon contends, for example, social liberalism and political fascism were not mutually exclusive in prewar Japan, and consequently “progressive individuals and groups cooperated with the authoritarian state on a widespread basis between 1931 and 1945.” Significantly, Garon continues, these alliances “first arose during the peaceful decade of the ‘liberal 1920s,’ not in the heat of the Fifteen Years’ War.”\(^{20}\)

A situation like this unlikely marriage of liberalism and authoritarianism in domestic society was also at work regarding the Gaimushô’s position in imperial Japan’s institutional machinery of foreign policy. The Gaimushô, through its consular system in Northeast Asia, acted in a manner identical to other administrative ministries in the Japanese state. Its duty was to intensively manage the everyday workings of civilian Japanese communities on the Asian mainland, and police work was a vital part of that mission. The pressures linked to managing those residents drove the Foreign Ministry to take measures that often far exceeded the internationally recognized parameters of treaty port imperialism in China. Furthermore, while the official voice of the Foreign Ministry proclaimed Japanese commitment to internationalism and mutual economic prosperity among the Great Powers in East Asia, at the local level the Gaimushô was engaged in a war during the 1920s against destabilizing political ideologies and their proponents. In contrast, then, to the notion that the Foreign Ministry had been forced to the periphery by the army on matters of continental policy by the early 1930s, the war on radical politics waged by the consular police after 1919 represents a dimension of Gaimushô interests that closely resembled the priorities of more conservative bureaucrats and the military. This is not to argue that the Foreign Ministry was necessarily a vanguard force behind aggressive expansionism; rather, its commitment to fighting communism through its consular security forces explains why the Gaimushô was not a consistent opponent of military expansionism and why in some cases it must even be understood as an advocate of that expansionism.

In addition to the interconnectivity of domestic politics and foreign policy, the history of the Foreign Ministry police also reminds us to appreciate the impact of both global international forces and local regional relationships in fomenting Japanese colonial expansionism. The trend in recent scholarship concerning the driving ideological energies of Japa-
nese imperialism has been to emphasize the impact of contemporaneous efforts by Japan’s ruling elite to fully integrate post-Tokugawa Japan into the international community of the late nineteenth century by mastering the practice and rhetoric of empire building.21 Many dimensions of consular police history support this line of argumentation, but that history also suggests that the particular regional dynamics of East Asian society should not be entirely discarded by giving primacy to the global context.

Just as the contours of East Asian modernity itself can (and must) be located in the centuries preceding the era of intense Western pressure during the nineteenth century, the dynamics of Japanese responses to political convulsions on the continent from the 1850s on cannot be isolated from patterns of continental influence with deep roots.22 From the seventh-century Taika Reforms designed to bolster the nascent imperial institution on the archipelago in response to the rise of a strong and expansive Tang dynasty, to the early-seventeenth-century Ming–Qing conflict and its reverberations on the consolidation of power over the islands by the Tokugawa clan, changes within China’s political and social order have consistently influenced transformations of the Japanese polity. By the early twentieth century, many within the ruling elite of Japan similarly viewed the internal disorder of continental Asian society as a threat to Japan because it left the entire region vulnerable to the social disease of Marxism, an illness that threatened to destabilize the political power structure on the home islands.

The intention here is not to offer an apologetic justification for Japanese aggression in China by historically contextualizing it. It would be a ludicrous argument indeed to contend, for example, that because Chinese society failed to unify itself efficiently after the collapse of imperial Confucianism in 1912, the Japanese were left with little choice but to seize control of the mainland themselves. Even so, the Japanese logic of pursuing an aggressive policy on the continent for the sake of its own domestic security cannot simply be dismissed as nothing but cynical, self-serving imperial rhetoric. To do so is to ignore centuries-old patterns in Japanese society’s relationship with the twists and turns of continental political life. As one historian of China has recently argued, for example, one can only begin to meaningfully explore the complexities of Chinese collaboration with the Japanese military after 1937 by considering “the understanding Chinese have developed over at least a millennium about how local authority and elite representation are constrained by, but also must coexist interactively with, state authority.”23 Likewise, another historian has argued persuasively that the Japanese Imperial Army’s invasion and conquest of Manchuria in 1932 was successful in large part because of the collaboration of local Chinese elites, and the ideology of resistance to Japanese aggression in northeast
China then developed outside of the region itself as a “resistancialist myth.” This is a thesis that moves beyond the simple dualism of Japanese brutality and Chinese victimization to identify the reasons for local Chinese collaboration with Japanese authorities in Manchuria, namely the belief among many local Chinese landlords and entrepreneurs that Japan was “bringing modernity at a time when native Chinese governments seemed incapable of doing so.” Analytical approaches such as these help one to move beyond the historiographical politics of postcolonialism and examine local colonial and wartime Sino-Japanese relations on their own contemporary terms.

Similarly, one must consider the logic of Japanese aggression in prewar China in the context of long-standing patterns of Japanese domestic political life that were intricately connected to the internal social order and disorder of Chinese society. On the surface this logic might seem to echo the arguments of early postwar Marxist scholarship in Japan that located a dark inevitability within the Japanese conquest of continental East Asia. Alternatively, one might hesitate to accept this premise because it can be easily twisted into a kind of rationalistic apologia for Japan’s invasion of China. I do not contend that these regional security anxieties constituted the principal context of Japanese expansionism. They formed, however, a significant context that shaped the Foreign Ministry’s actions in Northeast Asia, and thus they should not be ignored. In other words, what I mean to propose is a more specific formulation germane to the East Asian regional context of what Ronald Robinson has termed an “excentric theory” of imperialism in which the driving energy of expansionism is located neither at the colonial periphery nor in the metropolitan core but in the relationship between the two. In broader terms as well, failing to appreciate this interconnection by overemphasizing the global context of Western imperial models is to neglect the regional dynamics of East Asian society that have been at work for thousands of years and thus privilege the power of the past two centuries over that of the past few millennia.

This book is based upon on a wide variety of primary and secondary sources, but the analysis and interpretations put forth here are drawn heavily from my reading of a collection of documents first assembled as the *Gaimushô keisatsu* (A History of the Foreign Ministry Police). Consisting of over 72,000 pages, this collection is the largest and most significant source for exploring the history of Japan’s consular police in northeast Asia. Its compilation began when, in light of the anticipated abolition of Japanese extraterritoriality in Manzhouguo at the end of 1937, the Gaimushô deemed it both appropriate and necessary to begin assembling a documentary record that would trace the role played by its
consular police forces in the construction and execution of Japanese policy in Manchuria during the more than thirty years since the end of the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. In April 1937, Suematsu Kichiji, an influential figure whose role in the evolution of the consular police will be considered later, was selected to head the project, and on May 12, Foreign Minister Satô Naotake sent an order to all Japanese ambassadors abroad instructing them to begin collecting for submission to Tokyo any and all documentary records relevant to organization, deployment, and reform of Japanese consular police forces in Manchuria.²⁸

Initially, this “history of the Foreign Ministry police” was intended to be a history of solely those consular police forces in Manchuria, however, at some point during the first few exploratory sessions of the editorial committee, the scope of the project was expanded to include all consular police forces from their origins in treaty port Korea until the present day. By early May, Suematsu had selected two police veterans to begin gathering documents from various Tokyo area archives, and later that summer Japanese authorities in Korea started assembling consular police materials there. Progress was slow, however, since the second Sino-Japanese War erupted in the summer of 1937 and the exigencies of that conflict demanded the time and resources of everyone in the Foreign Ministry. The project nonetheless lumbered along for seven years, when in 1944 an index was finally produced and Suematsu took measures to make copies of the documents and protect them from air-raid conflagrations in Tokyo.²⁹

What motivated the editors of the Gaimushô keisatsushi to persevere for over seven years for the sake of creating this body of source materials? The police veteran editors claimed that the primary reason for the project was to “convey our glorious history to future generations.”³⁰ As Aiba Kiyoshi explained in greater depth in April 1944, by focusing on the consular duties of protecting Japanese civilians overseas the project would reveal changes over time in political affairs, popular conditions, economics, customs, and social life in general throughout the empire. However, as something that was much more than just a history of the consulates, Aiba believed that the project would be a guidebook better than any other for those of future generations who aim to study the “real history” of the Japanese empire.³¹

That the project was left incomplete due to the chaos in urban Japan during the final months of the war also helps to explain why historians have not explored these materials in a sustained and meaningful way.³² In fact, most of the documents survived in a rather raw, unfinished state; scanning the pages, for example, one quickly notices numerous instances where characters have been scratched out and corrected, awaiting later stages of editorial production. These sources thus represent an exciting opportunity to gain a new perspective on the local dynamics of Japan’s
colonial presence in East Asia. As many critics have pointed out, however, historical scholarship on the Japanese empire that follows such a close reading of official colonial archives can often become “colonized” by the ideological constructs of the original colonizers themselves. In the *Gaimushô keisatsu*shi, for example, there is the obvious problem that any set of sources produced by an institution to tell its own history must be tainted to some extent by self-serving motives. Choices were made by the editors regarding which documents to include and which to leave out, and in those choices the values and interests of the editors are surely revealed. Japanese colonial sources such as these must therefore be treated critically, and the conclusions evident in those materials not simply accepted as true and accurate accounts of colonial conditions. By the same token, however, one should not be too quick to simply dismiss every explanation given by Japanese colonial actors as nothing more than deliberately cynical hyperbole. To do so is to employ an equally ahistorical line of reasoning. The most interesting and important question to explore is why Japanese authorities made the claims they did. Whether those claims were “true” or not is of less relevance than what these claims can reveal about the impact of the colonial experience on Japanese society.

The book is organized into five chapters that follow a chronological progression. The analysis is deliberately broad, because my goal was to sketch out a portrait of trends in the development of the consular police system over the course of more than half a century. To delve inside every topic in microhistorical detail would demand a book many times the size of this one. Instead, I encourage future investigators to pick up and expand upon the many specific story lines and comparative possibilities I introduce here. The aim in the first two chapters is to describe both how the consular police as an institution came to be and the implications of that process for interpreting Japan’s place in the system of informal treaty port imperialism in East Asia. Chapter 1 locates patterns found in later processes of imperial encroachment within the evolution of the Japanese consular police in preannexation Korea and also ties them to developments on the home islands. Chapter 2 then shifts to the establishment of Foreign Ministry police forces in mainland Chinese treaty ports and the Manchurian frontier in China’s northeast, where I explore and assign great significance to the dispute between the governments of China and Japan over the propriety and fundamental legal legitimacy of the consular police.

With that background, the next three chapters then present the most significant interpretive threads of this book. Chapter 3 explores the profound importance of the Korean independence movement in exile and
the emergence of formal communist organizations on the home islands, in response to which political intelligence work began to occupy a greater and greater portion of consular police resources. Chapter 4 continues the analysis of the relationship between consular police forces and elements of Korean resistance in China, but the story also reveals how Gaimushô police in the field came increasingly to favor unilateral solutions to the security crises posed by Korean resistance in China and its connections to domestic Japanese left-wing politics. The fifth and final chapter explores the period from 1932 until the end of the Second World War, an era of both cooperation and conflict between Foreign Ministry police and the Japanese Army. By highlighting efforts of the consular police to continue the execution of security measures born of the 1920s while still protecting their jurisdictional prerogatives against infringement by the military, the commitment of the Foreign Ministry to resisting militaristic expansionism is called into question. Finally, the Conclusion offers several broad themes related to how the history of the Japanese consular police in Northeast Asia makes it possible to begin transcending boundaries of both political geography and historical imagination.