

Reactions to the Emergence of Japan as a Colonial Power: 1895-1905

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The 'Yellow Peril'

After the forced end of the isolationist policy of 'sakoku', which lasted from 1640 to 1854, following the arrival of Admiral Perry and his 'black ships', Japan pursued a vigorous policy of modernization to catch up with the Western colonial powers of Britain, France, Germany, Russia and the United States. This was in part an act of self-defense, in face of the humiliating realization that Japan was unable to refuse Perry's demands, but soon developed into a desire for military influence of its own, to put it on an equal footing with the West. The chance to take a first step in this direction came with the Sino-Japanese war in 1894. This war, over influence in Korea, was a great success for the Japanese, not only giving them control of the Korean peninsula, and Port Arthur, but also the Liaotung peninsula in south Manchuria, and with the ratification of the treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, control over Formosa and the Pescadores. The resonance of this first victory is commented on by Akane Kawakami in *Travellers' Visions: French Literary Encounters with Japan, 1881-2004*. Kawakami quotes from a contemporary political commentator, François de Villenoisy, who in *La Guerre Sino-Japonaise et ses conséquences pour l'Europe (The Sino-Japanese War and its Consequences for Europe)* [1895], described the war as "l'un des faits politiques les plus considérables des temps modernes" (*one of the most important events of modern times*), predicting "la

formation dans l'extrême-Asie d'une grande puissance maritime" (*the formation in Extreme-Asia of a great naval power*), which with Japan at its head would spearhead the rise of "un concert de peuples jaunes qui [...] feront à l'Europe et jusque chez elle une concurrence redoutable" (*a coalition of yellow peoples which [...] will be for Europe, even up to its doors, a considerable rival*) (Kawakami, p. 56) (from Villenoisy, pp. 5-6). The perception of an emerging threat to the world order, in other words of Western dominance of the world, led seemingly inevitably to the idea of the 'Yellow Peril'. Kawakami relates the origin of this expression: "The war even had an effect on the slumbers of the Kaiser. In April 1895, Kaiser Wilhelm II dreamt that a yellow peril would rise in the East, invade and devastate Europe: deciding that it had been a prophetic dream, he had a drawing of it made and sent it to his friend, Tsar Nicholas II" (Kawakami, p. 56). The consequences of the formation of this concept of the 'Yellow Peril' were both far-reaching for Japan and humiliating, as Russia, Germany and France consequently forced a revision of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, making Japan "surrender the Liaotung peninsula and Port Arthur in the interests of peace in the region."

Lafcadio Hearn

The decisive victory of the Japanese in the Sino-Japanese War, and the birth of the idea of the 'Yellow Peril', obviously had a great impact on public imagination at the time. This is reflected in the work of contemporary writers. A sympathetic view is to be found in the work of the Japanophile Lafcadio Hearn, in his collection of essays entitled *Kokoro*. This was first published in 1896, the same year Hearn became a naturalized Japanese citizen taking the name Yakumo Koizumi. Its tone of admiration is inevitable in one who had just adopted a new nationality, and who identified so strongly with Japanese culture. In the chapter entitled "After the War", he shares his own feelings of pride: "The military revival of the Empire — the real

birthday of New Japan — began with the conquest of China. The war is ended; the future, though clouded, seems big with promise; and however grim the obstacles to loftier and more enduring achievements, Japan has neither fears nor doubts” (Hearn, pp. 89-90). He warns of the dangers of the feeling of “immense self-confidence”, but also sees it as something to be admired: “It is not a new feeling created by victory. It is a race feeling, which repeated triumphs have served only to strengthen. From the instant of the declaration of war there was never the least doubt of victory” (Hearn, p. 90). He admires the “universal and profound enthusiasm” together with the dignity displayed, commenting that people showed “no outward signs of emotional excitement.” His admiration is remarkable in its fervor: “From first to last the nation felt sure of its own strength, and of the impotence of China.” He describes how the reaction of the Japanese public to their victory could be seen from toy-makers selling “legions of ingenious mechanisms, representing Chinese soldiers in flight, or being cut down by Japanese troopers” (Hearn, pp. 90-91), to the theatre where “almost every episode of the campaign was repeated on the stage” (Hearn, p.92).

Hearn’s empathy for the Japanese can be seen clearly in his comments on the forced revision of the Treaty of Shimonoseki: “as soon as the terms of peace had been announced, Russia interfered, securing the help of France and Germany to bully Japan” (Hearn, p. 96). This interference, which was indeed an attempted provocation, is seen as coming at a “cunningly chosen” “opportune moment”, as Japan’s navy “was not yet sufficiently heavy to face the combined navies of three European powers”. It is, however, cleverly dealt with: “The combination met with no opposition; the government played jiu-jitsu, and foiled expectations by unlooked-for yielding.” Hearn describes the difficulty the government had in holding to this policy, suppressing the “furious desire to battle with the three hostile powers at once” in the armed forces: “It needed all the firmness of the government to hold the nation back. Free speech was gagged; the press was severely silenced” (Hearn, p. 97). He looks on with approval: “The government really acted with faultless wisdom. At

this point of Japanese development a costly war with Russia could not fail to have consequences the most disastrous to industry, commerce, and finance” (Hearn, pp. 97-98). He does, however, acknowledge the damage that has been done: “But the national pride has been deeply wounded, and the country can still scarcely forgive its rulers” (Hearn, p. 98).

Hearn expresses his empathy for the Japanese, by reversing the typical Western view of ‘inferior’ Asians. In the chapter “A Conservative”, he describes the feelings of an erstwhile samurai towards his Western English teacher in terms of “the queer superstitions of the pre-Meiji era concerning ourselves”: “Although recognized as intelligent and formidable creatures, Occidentals were not generally regarded as quite human; they were thought of as more closely allied to animals than to mankind” (Hearn, p. 180). Hearn explains that the “timidity which foreigners then inspired”, therefore came from “ancient beliefs, common to both Japan and China, about animals gifted with supernatural powers, and capable of assuming human form” (Hearn, p.181). He describes their desire to learn from the West as purely being a means to an end, relating a conversation between two Japanese: “When we have learned Western military matters, we need not care for Western soldiers” (Hearn, p.184). The ex-samurai is indeed contemptuous of Westerners, and of those who have come into too close contact with them. Describing Yokohama his thoughts are harsh: “Even the Japanese of the port had been changed by foreign contact: they were rude and rough [...]. The foreigners themselves impressed him still more disagreeably: it was a period when new settlers could assume the tone of conquerors to the conquered” (Hearn, pp. 185-186). He is described as learning “to conquer his repulsions as obstacles to knowledge: it was the patriot’s duty to study calmly the nature of his country’s foes” (Hearn, p. 186).

Hearn’s partisan sentiments lead him into widespread condemnation of all things Western, in particular Christianity: “Even today in the West unthinking millions imagine some divine connection between military power and Christian

belief” (Hearn, p. 189). He specifically refers to justifications of colonialism: “There still survives among us the superstition that races professing Christianity are divinely destined to rob or exterminate races holding other beliefs” (Hearn, pp. 189-190). He describes his ex-samurai’s impressions of Western civilization and cities as inferior to his own “based on ideas totally the reverse of Far-Eastern ideals” (Hearn, p. 202). They are “as far away from his soul as the life of another planet under the sun.” His observations of Western “civilization” are entirely negative:

And he hated it, — hated its tremendous and calculated mechanism; hated its utilitarian stability; hated its conventions, its greed, its blind cruelty, its huge hypocrisy, the foulness of its want and the insolence of its wealth. Morally, it was monstrous; conventionally it was brutal. Depths of degradation unfathomable it had shown him, but no ideals equal to the ideals of his youth. (Hearn, p. 204)

The West is seen as entirely inferior to the noble values of traditional Japanese culture:

The real sublimities of the Occident were intellectual only; far steep cold heights of pure knowledge, below whose perpetual snow-line emotional ideals die. Surely the old Japanese civilization of benevolence and duty was incomparably better in its comprehension of happiness, in its moral ambitions, its larger faith, its joyous courage, its simplicity and unselfishness, its sobriety and contentment. Western superiority was *not* ethical. It lay in forces of intellect developed through suffering incalculable, and used for the destruction of the weak by the strong.

Hearn’s ex-samurai sees Japan will “have to learn the new forms of action, to master the new forms of thought, or to perish utterly” (Hearn, p. 205). It will have to “master

foreign science, to adopt much from the material civilization of her enemies”, but this will “not compel her to cast bodily away her ideas of right and wrong, of duty and of honor” (Hearn, pp. 205-206). Hearn has thus used the triumph of the Sino-Japanese war, the subsequent ‘bullying’ by the Western powers, and the consequent urgent need for modernization, to stress the moral abyss between cultures, in a way that would have been truly shocking to Western readers with conventional Eurocentric ideas about the superiority of Western civilization and the accompanying moral justification of continuing colonial domination.

Pierre Loti

At the opposite end of the spectrum of opinion, one of the most influential portrayals of Japan as a threat, as part of a ‘Yellow Peril’, can be found in the works of Pierre Loti. *La troisième jeunesse de Madame Prune (The Third Youth of Mrs. Plum)* [1905] relates a series of short port-calls Loti made to Japan as a part of a French naval exercise from December 1900 to October 1901. Loti is very conscious of the enthusiasm for an upcoming war with Russia, and indeed couches it in terms of the then popular term “Péril jaune” (*Yellow Peril*): “Tout est à la guerre. En ce moment-ci, tout est préparatifs pour cette grande tentative contre la Russie, — qui du reste, ne constituera que la manifestation initiale de l’immense Péril jaune” (*Everything is readying for war. At this very moment, everything is in preparation for this great attempt against Russia, — which in the end, is only an initial manifestation of the immense Yellow Peril*) (Loti, p. 33). As a naval man, Loti confesses his admiration of the smart and professional appearance of their sailors, even if he is dismissive of their physical stature: “les petits matelots japonais, vigoureux, lestes, propres, font très bon figure. Et les cuirassés du Japon, irréprochablement tenus, extra-modernes et terribles, paraissent de premier ordre” (*the little Japanese sailors, vigorous, lively, and smart, look very good. And the Japanese battle ships, perfectly kept,*

ultra-modern and fearsome, appear to be in the best condition) (Loti, p. 22). Loti seems confused, being at once all admiration, and at the same time horrified and contemptuous. He cannot reconcile the impeccable manners of the Japanese with their national pride and lust for war: “Et comment faire marcher de pair cet excès de politesse, de saluts et de sourires, avec la morgue nationale et la haine orgueilleuse contre l'étranger?” (*And how can you square this excess of good manners, greetings and smiles, with this nationalist arrogance and hatred of foreigners?*) (Loti, p. 61). The daily tea parties he attends, with “des mousmés fragiles comme des statuette de porcelaine” (*young ladies delicate as porcelain statuettes*) are a source of utter confusion for him:

Et c'est l'étrange petit monde qui médite de s'attaquer féroce-ment à l'immense Russie; les frères et les maris de ces bibelots [...] veulent affronter les armées du tsar!... On n'en revient pas de tant de confiance et d'audace, surtout lorsque dans la rue on voit ces soldats, ces matelots japonais, tout propre et tout petits, imberbes figures de bébé jaune, passer à côté des lourds et solides garçons blonds qui composent les équipages russes. (*And it is this strange little world which is thinking of ferociously attacking vast Russia; the brothers and husbands of these [...] trinkets want to face up to the armies of the Tsar!... You can't get over such confidence and daring, most of all when you see in the street these Japanese soldiers and sailors all prim and tiny, clean-shaven yellow baby faces, walking past the burly and solid blond young men who make up the Russian crews*).

He becomes increasingly aware of the hostility towards foreigners that lies beneath the polite façade, of “l'attitude de plus en plus arrogante qu'affectent les Nippons d'aujourd'hui vis-à-vis des étrangers” (*the ever growing arrogant attitude that the Nipponese put on towards foreigners*) (Loti, p. 63), and it is his resentment of this arrogance that pushes him to his final crushing denouncement of the country. He sees

the supposed “progrès” (*progress*) of modernization and the rejection of traditional Japanese values as both ridiculous and terrifying:

Une fois tout cela évanoui, au souffle du bienfaisant progrès, qu’y restera-t-il? Le peuple le plus laid de la Terre, physiquement parlant. Et un peuple agité, querelleur, bouffi d’orgueil, envieux du bien d’autrui, maniant, avec une cruauté et une adresse de singe, ces machines et ces explosifs dont nous avons eu l’inqualifiable imprévoyance de lui livrer les secrets. Un tout petit peuple qui sera, au milieu de la grande famille jaune, le ferment de haine contre nos races blanches, l’excitateur des tueries et des invasions futures.

(Once that is all gone, blown away in the breeze of benevolent progress, what will remain? The ugliest people on earth, physically speaking. A people troubled, querulous, puffed up with pride, jealous of what others have, using with a cruelty and skill of monkeys, the secrets of the machines and explosives that we had the unforgivable carelessness to give them. Very little people who will be, in the center of the great yellow family, the catalyst of hatred against our white races, the instigator of slaughter and future invasions.) (Loti, p.119)

This dire conclusion is tempered to some extent with pity, although as always with Loti, containing the pejorative adjective ‘little’: “Et bientôt on les enverra, par milliers et centaines de milliers, joncher de leurs cadavres ces plaines de Manchourie, où doit se dérouler la guerre inévitable et prochaine... Pauvres petits paysans japonais!...” (*And soon they will send them, in thousands and hundreds of thousands, to strew their bodies across the Manchurian plains, where the up-coming and inevitable war will take place... Poor little Japanese peasants!...*) (Loti, p. 125).

Although the events in the book are based on Loti’s visits from 1900 to 1901, *La troisième jeunesse de Madame Prune* was published in 1905, following the Russo-Japanese war in 1904-5, and Japan’s decisive victory over the Russian fleet at

the Battle of Tsushima. Loti modified his statements about the Japanese accordingly in a preface to the book, but still displays bad grace:

Aujourd'hui, malgré la brutalité de leur agression première, leur bravoure incontestablement mérite que l'on s'incline, et je veux saluer ici, d'un salut profond et grave, les héroïques petits soldats jaunes tombés devant Port-Arthur ou vers Moukden. Mais il ne me semble pas que le respect dû à tant de morts m'oblige d'altérer l'image qui m'est restée de leurs pays.

(Today, in spite of the brutality of their initial aggression, their uncontested bravery merits a bow, and I would like to salute here, deeply and gravely, the heroic little yellow soldiers who fell at Port Arthur or Moukden. But it doesn't seem to me that the respect due to so many dead, should make me alter the image their country has left me.) (Loti, p. 3)

The best-selling Loti thus did his best to cement public opinion. The “petits soldats jaunes” (*little yellow soldiers*), although heroic, are still to be held in contempt, and are more than ever a threat as part of the dreaded “Péril jaune” (*Yellow Peril*).

Anatole France

In *Travellers' Visions: French Literary Encounters with Japan, 1881-2004*, Akane Kawakami stresses just how shocking the Japanese victory over Russia in 1904 was for Europe. It was “the first time in history [that] an Eastern nation had triumphed over a Western one” (Kawakami, pp. 57-58). It was “seen as apocalyptic by many commentators.” She quotes from Charles Pettit's book *Pays de Mousmés, Pays de Guerre! (Land of Pretty Girls, Land of War!)* [1905], to show how for some, it represented a threat to France itself in the form of its colonies in Indochina:

Le Japon est la seule puissance qui soit vraiment à craindre pour notre empire d'Indochine [...] il est à souhaiter que les peuples européens fassent tous leurs efforts pour rester d'accord entre eux et permettre à la race blanche de garder sa suprématie dans tout l'Extrême-Orient.

(Japan is the only power to be feared for our empire in Indochina [...] it is to be hoped that the European peoples will make every effort to remain in agreement with each other and allow the white race to keep its supremacy in the Extreme Orient.) (Kawakami, p.59) (from Pettit, p.236)

Kawakami points out that this racist view was by no means universally held. She points to “the nascent Socialist [...] movements in Europe [who] tended to see Japan not so much as the Yellow Peril as a Yellow Hope.” For many “Japan became the symbol of an anti-colonialist force, struggling valiantly against European domination in the East” (Kawakami, p. 59).

One of the most influential contemporary socialist writers was the French Academician Anatole France, and it was he, in his 1905 collection of dialogues entitled *Sur la pierre blanche* (*On the White Stone*), who made a powerfully sarcastic attack on colonialist prejudice. France’s narrator, Nicole Langelier, shows how Japan has broken the rules of ‘colonial wars’:

Or, le principe fondamental de toute guerre colonial est que l’Européen soit supérieur aux peuples qu’il combat; sans quoi la guerre n’est plus colonial [...]. Il convient, dans ses sortes de guerres, que l’Européen attaque avec de l’artillerie et que l’Asiatique ou l’Africain se défende avec des flèches, des massues, des sagayes et des tomahawks. [...] en aucun cas il ne doit être armé ni instruit à l’européenne.

(Now, the fundamental principle of all colonial wars is that the European is superior to those he is fighting; without which the war is no longer colonial

[...]. *It is fitting, in these types of wars, that the European attacks with artillery and that the Asian or African defends himself with arrows, clubs, assegais and tomahawks. [...] in no way may he be armed or trained in a European way.*)
(France, pp. 209-210)

The Japanese have offended these principles: “Les Japonais s’en sont écartés. [...] En se battant mieux que les Européens, ils n’ont point d’égard aux usages consacrés, et ils s’agissent d’une façon contraire, en quelque sorte, au droit des gens” (*The Japanese have strayed from this. [...] In fighting better than the Europeans, they have no respect for the accepted rules, and act, as it were, in violation of people’s rights*) (France, p.210).

Kawakami points out that France’s sarcastic narrator shares just one thing in common with the racist epithets of Loti, that of “[smallness] and yellowness” (Kawakami, p. 61). He depicts the massive Russian bear being attacked by a swarm of angry bees: “et tandis que la bête énorme allongeait indolemment le museau sur la ruche nipponne, les abeilles jaunes, armant toutes à la fois leurs ailes et leurs aiguillons, la criblèrent des piqûres enflammées” (*and whilst the enormous beast indolently stretched its muzzle over the Japanese hive, the yellow bees, readying their wings and stings all at once, riddled it with fiery stings*) (France, p. 208). This effectively turns the image of smallness into something formidable, and as for the pejorative ‘yellowness’ of “le péril jaune”, this is as nothing compared to the threat of “le péril blanc” (*White Peril*):

Il ne paraît pas toutefois, à première vue, que le péril jaune, dont les économistes européens s’épouvantent, soit comparable au péril blanc suspendu sur l’Asie. Les Chinois n’envoient pas à Paris, à Berlin, à Saint-Petersbourg, des missionnaires pour enseigner aux chrétiens le foug-choui et jeter le désordre dans les affaires européennes. L’amiral Togo n’est pas venu avec douze cuirassés bombarder la

rade de Brest, en vue de favoriser le commerce japonais en France. [...] Les armées des grandes puissances asiatiques n'ont pas emportées à Tokio et à Pékin les tableaux et la vaisselle de l'Elysée.

(Nevertheless, it doesn't seem at a first glance, that the Yellow Peril, that European economists fear so much, is comparable to the White Peril hanging over Asia. The Chinese don't send to Paris, Berlin or Saint-Petersburgh missionaries to teach Christians feng-shu and disrupt European affairs. Admiral Togo didn't send twelve battle ships to bombard the sea lanes off Brest, to gain an advantage for Japanese trade in France. [...] The armies of the great Asian powers didn't take back to Tokyo or to Peking the pictures and table-ware of the Elysée palace.) (France, pp. 213-214)

Kawakami points out that the “twelve battle ships” is a clear reference to Admiral Perry and his forced ‘opening’ of Japan in 1854, and the reference to “pictures and table-ware” is clearly a reference to the sacking of the Chinese Imperial Summer Palace in 1860 and the sack of Peking during the Boxer Rebellion against colonial domination of 1900-1901. Kawakami describes this as “an obvious but effective anti-colonialist mode of discourse, transforming the experience of the colonised into that of the coloniser, so that the self is forced to ‘exchange places’ with the other” (Kawakami, p. 62). Anatole France is thus bringing “his reader to a realisation of his nation’s self-centred actions, and to a humanist understanding of the evils of colonisation.”

Through his narrator, France is making a point that the Japanese victory is a step to world peace: “Mais si le Japon rend les jaunes respectables aux blancs, il aura grandement servi la cause de l’humanité et préparé à son insu, et sans doute contre son désir, l’organisation pacifique du monde” (*But if Japan has made yellow people respectable to whites, it will have done a great service to humanity, and prepared without it knowing, and doubtless against its wishes, for the peaceful organization of*

the world) (France, p. 218). France's hope is that "Japan will develop and strengthen China", as a "strong China will contribute to a better balance of power, and therefore lead to the ultimate goal of the socialist, peace amongst nations" (Kawakami, pp. 62-63).

Conclusion

As has been illustrated, the military success of Japan, following its modernization and consequent military successes in the Meiji period, provoked a mixture of very different reactions. The polar opposition of the partisanship of the newly naturalized Lafcadio Hearn with the unapologetically anti-Japanese representations of Pierre Loti, gave way to a more reasoned intellectual response from socialists such as Anatole France. As was to be expected, all three points of view would have their adherents, and would develop, becoming increasingly more entrenched in the following years.

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Following the modernization of Japan in the Meiji period, and its consequent emergence as a military force to be reckoned with, reactions in the West were mixed. Kaiser Wilhelm II gave birth to the concept of a 'Yellow Peril' threatening Western civilization, an idea given weight to by no less than the prolifically successful French author Pierre Loti. The Japanophile Lafcadio Hearn, provided an initial opposition to this blatant racism/partisanship, followed by the socialistic ideals of Anatole France, who viewed Japan's emergence as a major power to be in the interests of the demise of colonialism and the promotion of world peace. All three literary reactions would pave the way for continuing controversy.