


# Aspects of the Russo-Japanese War

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## **The Japanese Military during the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-05: A Reconsideration of Command Politics and Public Images**

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University of Cambridge:

## **British Observers of the Russo-Japanese War**

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## Preface

On 6 February 1998 a symposium was held at the Suntory Centre on Aspects of the Russo-Japanese War. There were two speakers. One was Dr Stewart Lone, Senior Lecturer in Modern East Asian History at the Australian Defence Force Academy / University of New South Wales, who is the author of a monograph on the first Sino-Japanese War, *Japan's First Modern War: Army and Society in the Conflict with China, 1894-95* (Macmillan / St Martin's Press, London / NY, 1994), and is currently working on the Japanese expatriat community in Latin America, and the army's relationship with society and politics in prewar Japan. The other was Dr Philip Towle, Director of the Centre for International Studies at the University of Cambridge. Dr Towle is the author of *Enforced Disarmament after Wars* (Oxford University Press, 1998), and is currently working on postwar peace conferences.

We are grateful to both authors for allowing us to reproduce their papers here.

Janet Hunter  
July 1998

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# **The Japanese Military during the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-05: A Reconsideration of Command Politics and Public Images**

Stewart Lone

There are many reasons to examine Japan's war with Russia between February 1904 and September 1905. Indeed, it may be argued that if one does not understand Japan in 1905, then one is hard pressed to understand it at any point up to 1945 and even beyond. Perhaps most important for our purposes is that the war with Russia signals the start of Japanese territorial expansion on the continent, the rapid deterioration of Japan's relations with the U.S., China, Britain and the British empire, but also the growth of what have proved to be very durable myths about the Japanese military and the level of martial values in civil society. It is the wartime bases for these myths on which the following paper will focus. In doing so, it considers the Japanese military on two levels. Firstly, there is what, for convenience, is described here as command politics, that is, the question of unity in thought and action among senior army officers in government and in the field. Secondly, we look at civil society and consider some aspects of popular culture as they relate to the war. The paper as a whole is framed by three quotations, each of which illustrates a common belief about the military and militarism in Japan.

By way of introduction, we should note that the myths about Japan which develop from 1905 continue to be of relevance in the 1990s, both in terms of domestic politics and in relations with the outside world. It is in this context that our first quotation is taken from Ozawa Ichiro as head of the New Frontier Party. In contrast to Prime Minister Hashimoto's January 1998 letter to readers of the distinctly downmarket newspaper *The Sun* (calling for renewed Anglo-

Japanese understanding based apparently on a shared love of Sherlock Holmes and boy scouting), Ozawa wrote in *The Economist* on 9 March 1996:

‘Nations are nurtured by myths... Unless outsiders place what is happening in Japan today in the context of our history and our myths, they will find it difficult to understand the particular turning-point we are facing in our long evolution as a nation... In essence, we see ourselves as a cosy village society where consensus is the norm and where we all live by unspoken rules to make life tolerable in a green but crowded land with few natural resources.’

This idea of what might be called Little Japan, peaceful and threatening to no-one, addresses the military by omission and, in so doing, offers an alternative myth to that which dominates Japan's modern history up to 1945. It is, however, precisely such a Little Japan mentality that Ozawa attacks as inappropriate for a state with a global economic presence and responsibilities, and he has called on Japan to become a ‘normal nation’. By this, he means in particular one whose participation in international peacekeeping and security operations is no longer heavily shackled by constitutional restraints and public opposition.

The problem for Ozawa is that the Japanese public, notwithstanding the ignorant and indolent view recycled in the British press, has a clear, if simplistic (and perhaps even mythical) historical awareness of the catastrophes at home and overseas which accompanied the military's prominence in pre-1945 Japan. This awareness is supported by those school text-books which present a straightforward view of Japanese military aggression, the suffering of civilian populations in China, Korea, and Southeast Asia, and the wartime devastation at home. Overall, this demonic perception of the pre-1945 military leaves the present Japan Self-Defence Force (JSDF) extremely circumspect; not for nothing was Maeda Tetsuo's summary history of the force translated in 1995 as *The Hidden Army*. Indeed, a 1993 survey of public opinion by the Defence

Agency showed only about a quarter of respondents had even a positive image of the JSDF with its limited functions and low profile. The manner in which it tries to separate itself from the imperial forces is evident in a recruitment poster of 1996: this featured a young female officer surrounded by slogans on peace, most of these in English, but with nothing whatsoever to indicate the responsibilities of defence; one is reminded of Stanley Kubrick's black comedy *Dr. Strangelove* in which the air force base of General Jack D. Ripper, the instigator of nuclear holocaust, is plastered with boards stating 'peace is our profession'.

As we are to comment later on public images during the Russian war, we might add here that the Japanese military is also a peripheral figure in contemporary popular culture. The relentless violence and combat of manga comics and videos is often noted by cultural commentators but, as indicated by the title of Antonia Levi's guide to the genre, *Samurai From Outer Space* (Chicago 1996), much of this is presented as science fiction or fantasy, and when the modern military (imperial or postwar) does appear, it is generally as the villain. Contemporary non-manga cinema incorporating the JSDF is rare. One exception is a 1990 film titled *Madonna no Gotoku* (Like a Madonna) which, in fact, is a romantic drama aimed at young career women. The most interesting scene, and one which delights my officer cadet students at the Australian Defence Force Academy, features the powerful, strong-willed heroine who, having repeatedly ignored a young man's attentions, is confronted by him for the first time in military uniform and immediately, unhesitatingly succumbs. Not surprisingly, the JSDF co-operated with this production in the supply of tanks and aircraft but it does not seem to have been popular enough to generate a sequel or emulation by others.

In external relations, the persistence, and continuing relevance, of pre-1945 ideas of Japan is most obvious in Korea and China, where there are regular warnings about the 'resurgence' of Japanese militarism. However, in Australia, Britain, and the US, the issue of POWs also perpetuates images of Japan's imperial military, and, by implication, of its popular militarism, with reminders of Japan's alleged martial culture and widely-held ideas of honour and dishonour regarding capture by the enemy. In passing, we might note that at the end of the Russian war, there were roughly 2,000 Japanese and 70,000 Russians held captive; in general, the Russians were treated generously (to the extent that the Japanese press reported some hoped the war would continue so they could remain in captivity), while concern at home about Japanese POWs was solely for their well-being and with no criticism of their integrity.<sup>1</sup> This should make us wary of claims, from whatever source, of Japanese military 'traditions', and alert to the possibility that these were, as the phrase goes, invented traditions.

One reason for mentioning the issue of POWs is that it seems arguable that behind the recurring criticism of Japanese brutality, there is a fear that militarism is only slumbering beneath economic conquests. In such reasoning, one might find the argument that Japan can only emerge from a militaristic culture by acknowledging its past and compensating its victims. This reasoning might help to explain the rigidity with which some continue to view Japan. An example of this surfaced in Australia in 1997. Shortly before the visit of Prime Minister Hashimoto, there was scheduled in Canberra, federal capital of Australia but also an independent territory government, the opening of a park to celebrate its sister city relationship with Nara. This was to be called the Canberra-Nara Peace Park. However uncontroversial this may sound, it was denounced by representatives of Australian ex-servicemen's organisations on the grounds that no official use of the word 'peace' was appropriate until Japan

made amends for its wartime treatment of Western POWs. This was supported by Prime Minister Howard and ultimately the park was renamed. Shortly thereafter, Hashimoto arrived and, in view of geopolitical realities in the Pacific, Howard agreed to a significantly increased level of defence co-operation between Australia and Japan. Thus, we have history, myth, and pragmatism, co-existing in a sometimes tortuous mix.

If the understanding at home and overseas of Japan, past and present, is based on a confusion of myth and history, then it is obviously worth going back to the origin of some of these myths and reconsidering the history. In so far as it is argued here that some of the strongest myths and images about Japan were consolidated by the Russian war, let us now return to that conflict.

### Command Politics

The second of our framing quotations comes from an Australian senator named Pearce, speaking in November 1905. Taking a public stance not unlike the more private view of U.S. president, Theodore Roosevelt, Pearce insisted:

‘Japan has shown that she is an aggressive nation. She has shown that she is desirous of pushing out all around. What has always been the effect of victory and conquest upon nations? Do we not know that it stimulates them to further conflict? to obtain fresh territory? Has not that been the history of our own race? Is there any country that offers such a temptation to Japan as Australia does?’<sup>ii</sup>

The assumption here is that Japan was committed to expansion and, against Russia as earlier against China, had demonstrated the military capacity to achieve its goal. Moreover, it was presumed that a plan for expansion existed even as Japan professed to be friendly to the Western powers and a loyal ally of Britain. The result in Australasia and the U.S. was a major shift in defence policy directly to target Japanese

'aggression'. In short, Japan from 1905 was seen by some Western states as both militarily powerful and untrustworthy.

One of the bases for such an assumption was the belief in a strong, cohesive and clear-sighted army leadership which had planned Japan's victories and which dominated Japanese society and politics. This image continues to surface in the many histories of Meiji Japan which speak confidently of the military (gumbu), military faction (gumbatsu), or faction of General Yamagata (Yamagata-ha), and which describe a clear, unswerving line in foreign policy from the first Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95, through a decade of military planning and public forbearance (gashin shootan) up to the Russo-Japanese war, and then on to continental expansion at the expense of China, Korea, and later the Western imperial powers. Consequently, the first point we need to make about the imperial army is its lack of cohesion in 1904-05 and its confusion about where it (and Japan) was heading.

At the highest level, the army faction of General Yamagata is presumed to include General Katsura Taro as prime minister, Army Minister Terauchi Masatake, and Vice Chief of Staff Kodama Gentaro. However, from the war's outset, one sees little evidence of unity amongst these officers, or docility in the face of Yamagata's instructions. For example, in February 1904, Yamagata was at odds with Prime Minister Katsura. Yamagata recognised Japan's weakness relative to Russia and wanted Katsura to rouse a spirit of race hatred for the enemy in order to strengthen the people's will to resist. Katsura, recognising more Japan's economic weakness and its reliance in fighting the war on loans in the 'white' financial centres of London and New York, (a reliance emphasised by the general understanding that Japan stood no chance of extracting from Russia an indemnity even if it were victorious), rejected this



suggestion and instead ordered a clear distinction be made between the enemy government and its people.<sup>iii</sup>

One problem over which Yamagata and Katsura did concur was a proposal by Vice Chief of Staff Kodama. This, in March 1904, was for a new supreme command (*dai sotokufu*) to be established in Manchuria under the crown prince as representative of the emperor. The proposal implied either that Kodama doubted the ability of his seniors to direct the war from Tokyo, or that he felt Japan had to take extraordinary measures if it were to stand any chance of success. As prime minister, however, Katsura wanted no diminution of his ability to co-ordinate military and diplomatic affairs and no weakening of the imperial headquarters. In this, he was supported by General Yamagata and Army Minister Terauchi. Notwithstanding this opposition, Kodama and the proponents of the Manchurian command refused to give way. Despite, or perhaps because of the magnitude of the Russian war, no compromise proved acceptable until late May 1904 when, at Yamagata's suggestion, he himself took over from the apolitical General Oyama as chief of staff, and Oyama went to Manchuria as head of a newly-created senior command. Once in place, however, the staff of this new command is said to have played favourites with intelligence reports, giving greatest credence from those of its supporters. Moreover, the general staff in Tokyo, now under Yamagata, proved reluctant to work with anyone and was later described by Army Minister Terauchi as 'a law unto themselves'.<sup>iv</sup>

One area in which army disunity proved most damaging to Japan's international position was in dealings with the forty or so foreign military observers and more than eighty foreign journalists. Pinned in Tokyo and far from the action during the summer of 1904, they made their resentment at army restrictions most public in their boycott of the farewell for General Oyama

as he left to head the new Manchurian command. One of their number, Captain Lionel James of *The Times*, went so far as to return home in protest. Another writer for *The Times*, G. E. Morrison, previously a noisy advocate in support of Japan's war against Russia, and a future adviser to the Chinese government, began advising his paper to moderate its support for Britain's ally and, after the war, he was heard to say privately that henceforth he would 'smash' Japan as he (so he believed) had smashed Russia. Although General Katsura had appointed a leading editor, Tokutomi Soho, to oversee the foreigners' comfort, he was unable to control the army both in Japan and in the field. As General Terauchi noted in his diary, 'the 2nd Army's cold treatment of the journalists has greatly affected British opinion and devalued our loan - the government is terribly distressed'. In this way, disunity within the Japanese military made it more difficult to fight the war, to pay off the bill for it in subsequent years, and to restore the goodwill of former friends which thus further exacerbated Japan's insecurity.<sup>v</sup>

One of the reasons for confusion arising from the war is that foreign observers exaggerated the Japanese military's strength and purpose, while Japanese commanders focused on areas of disunity and weakness. For example, in contrast to those who believe Japan plotted revenge against Russia after 1895 and always looked to seize the Korean peninsula, Yamagata as prime minister in 1899 had actually contemplated abandoning all interest in Korea if this were necessary to avoid war with Russia, and only late in December 1903 had he been forced to concede that war could no longer be avoided. Despite Japan's early victories, the army failed to circle and destroy the Russian main force in the battle of Mukden in March 1905. With this, Yamagata as army chief of staff recognised Japan's military inability to continue the war; there was also a belief that Russia would soon commit another half million men, something for which Japan had no answer. Consequently, the search was accelerated for peace

but also to avoid responsibility. For the public, Yamagata asked Prime Minister Katsura to eliminate mention of the military's exhaustion and stress financial reasons for seeking talks with Russia. This Katsura refused to do: not only would it have been untrue, it would have increased blame on him for what all knew, and had known from the outset, was going to be an unsatisfactory peace.<sup>vi</sup>

At the end of the war, few among the army leadership had any illusions about the limited nature of Japan's victory; there were far too many dead and wounded and, as expected, no indemnity. The result was a growing fear among officers of social unrest, public disaffection, and of radical thought infiltrating army barracks. Japan's controversial military policies after 1905, restricting access by the Western powers and Chinese authorities in the newly-acquired Manchurian leasehold, were seen as essential due to the likelihood of a Russian war of revenge. Japan's ability to resist this was further impeded by the colossal war debt straining the Japanese economy for years hence and delaying the creation of new army divisions. It was, of course, this issue of new divisions which led to the clash between sections of the army and party government in 1912, the so-called Taisho political incident, in which the army can only be described as the principal loser. The origins of this incident, however, go back to the end of the Russian war when Yamagata had insisted on at least six new army divisions. At that time, it was Katsura and Terauchi who countered that Japan simply lacked the funds for anything on this scale but, under pressure, they had agreed to build two new divisions (in 1907), with two more to follow once the economy recovered.<sup>vii</sup>

The self-perception of weakness is, it seems to me, essential in understanding the actions of the Japanese military in this and succeeding decades. In 1905, the bluster and rhetoric of later years is markedly absent. Instead, senior

officers have if anything a pessimistic view of Japan's successes, and they would have considered the comments of Senator Peace on expansion in Australia, or those later of Homer Lea concerning an attack on the US as simply absurd. Instead, it would seem that local use of the mythology of 'bushido Japan' grew in inverse proportion to this sense of weakness. This, however, would appear to be our cue to move on to wartime civil society and the question of popular militarism. In so doing, we will use the central prefecture of Gifu as a case study.

### Public Images

In order to strengthen its hand on the battlefield, and in negotiations both for peace and in gaining access to foreign loans, it was important for Japan to develop the image of a society fully behind the war effort and in which every man, woman and child was both imbued with the values of the warrior and ready to fight. These ideas of popular militarism were to rebound against Japan in the Pacific war and even thereafter to cloud assumptions about Japanese society. At the time of the Russian war, Nitobe Inazo was one of the most prominent authors of the belief in what he termed 'bushido - the soul of Japan'. This was a view, however, supported by foreign observers of the war, including General Sir Ian Hamilton. In the third of our quotations, he describes civil society:

'In their schoolrooms are portraits of heroes and pictures of great battles. The Japanese have behind them the moral character produced by mothers and fathers, who again are the products of generations of mothers and fathers nurtured in ideas of self-sacrifice and loyalty. But they do not on this account trust entirely to heredity to produce them an army. If they wish to have every man in the nation a potential fighter they know they must begin at the beginning, and put the right ideas into the babies as soon as they begin to toddle. The parade march of the 5th German Army Corps impressed me far less than the little Japanese boys and girls I saw marching down in their companies to say good- bye to

the soldiers. 'There', I said to myself, 'go the world-renowned, invincible armies of 1920!'<sup>viii</sup>

Given Hamilton's emphasis on the young, let us start with some comments on schools and youth.

The school system was seen as the cradle of civic values. In a country apparently faced by enemies and fairweather friends, these were to be the values of patriotism, service and sacrifice, and, in cultivating these, the potential value of wartime stories of heroism and tragedy was widely recognised. Consequently, in 1904-05, schoolchildren were brought into contact with the war by attendance at local railway stations to greet passing troop trains, collecting biographical information on local men at the front, charting the passage of the war in classroom maps, participating in victory celebrations, and in commemorating the war through the planting of memorial trees in the school area. They were also in attendance at military funerals, of which there were many.

The casual assumption is that use of the war in education inevitably increased militarism. We may question this. Firstly, schools were one of the institutions to suffer most directly from the war as local governments abandoned spending on construction in order to divert monies to the war effort. The result was that new school buildings were put in abeyance, existing schools went without facilities or funds for such as academic or sporting prizes, some schools were forced to merge, and many teachers were fired while those who remained took on increased burdens.<sup>ix</sup> At the same time, teachers appear to have been a favourite target for public sniping. Thus, with reduced money, staff and facilities, an increased work load, and a lack of public sympathy, it may well be that teachers were ambivalent about the war and merely saw visits to the rail station or collecting details on local servicemen as a respite from class. We should also remember that the children of 1905 grew to adulthood in the

1920s, the time both of 'Taisho democracy' and army cutbacks, trends which they seem to have accepted with equanimity.

In a related point, we might ask about the youth of the first Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95. Historians often see this as a wildly popular triumph with, as one author put it in 1997, the public 'drunk with victory'.<sup>x</sup> Primary schoolchildren from that time are typically described as longing for the colourful prints of war and constantly singing the war songs. By 1904, however, some of these were of an age for military service. A group of young men volunteering to become officer cadets is described by an infantry captain in the *Gifu Nichi Nichi-Shimbun* (Gifu Daily Press) of 21 April 1905:

'The weakness of youth in Gifu prefecture is shocking! Look at the volunteers' pretty silk garments, hair combed in the latest fashion, smelling of perfume and pomade. When I watched them during the break, only three of the forty or so were reading seriously; the rest just chattering nonsense. Whether they were full of confidence or just stupid and lazy, I couldn't say.'

From works by Oka Yoshitake, Jay Rubin and others, we are aware of public concern about youth morality after the Russian war. However, the term 'daraku gakusei' or 'degenerate students' occurred often during the war. Indeed, upon hearing of the unsatisfactory peace terms of September 1905, one resident suggested that the habit of Gifu youth, young men wearing cosmetics and young women striding powerfully down the street in close-fitting garments, was such that Japan's success on the field could only be matched by diplomatic failure in such a distorted world.<sup>xi</sup>

One of the wartime concerns about youth centred on talk of a student craze for picture postcards, much like the fad in our own time for picture cards of sport stars. In the case of 1904-05, the fad was apparently not for military images. Instead, the talk was of the general wartime popularity of 'bijin-ga', images of

pretty women, and the adverts of postcard dealers were certainly dominated less by the martial and more by the feminine and poetic (and, for that matter, the comic). Another target of these images also evoked concern: it was feared that too many postcards of young women were being sent to the front where soldiers, especially young single men, might be distracted, perhaps with fatal consequences. Even more disturbing, therefore, was the wartime rise in illicit erotic photographs. There were repeated arrests of those making and trading such material but the competence of the police was often questioned (it was said that a group of policemen taking a local train had been unable to figure out how to open the window until a citizen assisted them with their enquiries). Thus, erotic images continued to be made and, as in the case of one Gifu city photographer, the intended clientele was clearly the army in Manchuria.<sup>xii</sup>

It would seem the wartime public looked for a variety of pleasing images. This was apparent in the new media of cinema. Some film of Japanese troops had been shot during the Boxer war of 1900 but, in 1904-05, there was newsreel of General Oyama leaving Shimbashi station for the front, scenes of Japanese troops in action, film shot by a French cameraman with the Russian army, and what appears to be a drama telling the life and heroic death of one Lieutenant Wakamiya. Given the reports, then and later, on Japanese popular militarism, we might expect uncritical enthusiasm for these war movies. There was, however, an openly expressed discontent with some aspects of the work. Exaggerated advertising was a major problem and roundly criticised by those who emerged from the theatres with a sense of disappointment. Elsewhere, the story of Wakamiya was praised by the local newspaper as highly dramatic but, it went on to note, it was a pity it had no 'essential' audience. The paper did not elaborate but it would appear that audiences wanted entertainment and, by mid-1905, may actually have been growing battle-weary of the long war. In fact, while there was little open praise for the war cinema, a showing of

a serial on Napoleon was said to have held its audience so spellbound, they did not even fan themselves despite the oppressive heat of an August theatre.<sup>xiii</sup>

The mention of overblown film posters leads us to our final clutch of images. Much is made of the power (or poverty) of advertising in changing habits and desires. In so far as advertisements aim to grab the attention and speak directly to a mass audience so as to have it part with money, we might expect in a militaristic society a rash of advertisers to employ patriotic imagery. We should also remember that wartime austerity had led to hard times for many producers so there was an incentive to use whatever might work. In so far as austerity was the direct result of war, however, there was a danger that military themes might actually inhibit sales, not least by reminding potential buyers that, as patriots, they should be saving their money for the war effort. In this, the postcard sellers appear to have been nicely placed: they could advertise their wares (especially images of pretty women or local scenes) as being ideal small gifts to troops but also objects of acceptable beauty in their own right (the traders in illicit erotica might argue the same, omitting the word 'acceptable').

A 1996 study by Tan'o and Kawada on Japanese images of war in modern art sees a new emphasis in formal painting from 1904-05 on blood, death, and misery. Compared to the effervescence of pictures from the first Sino-Japanese war, they identify a higher level of realism and humanism developing in the view of war by Japanese artists. In commercial imagery, however, we can isolate at least three types of imagery in wartime advertisements. These might be described as the military-heroic, the military-comic, and simply the comic. On the heroic side, Kirin Beer, for example, used a map of the battlefield and the banner, 'Manchuria and Korea - soon to be outlets for Kirin Beer', (perhaps implying that the war was being fought on their behalf rather



than that they were assisting in the war effort). Even more grandly and theatrically heroic is an advertisement for a draper's, featuring a group of soldiers and sailors, some in dramatic postures and all with resolute expressions (albeit with a pretty woman given exaggerated prominence from the background).<sup>xiv</sup>

On the military-comic side was the advert for Pierce bicycles. This featured a Japanese private cycling triumphantly down the spine and over the head of a floundering Russian officer. The implication of riding to victory, however, needs to be placed in context: bicycles were regarded at the time as dangerous objects, unharnessed by any rules of the road, and typically favoured by arrogant youth who failed to stop after one of the many accidents. Thus, the unfavourable image of the bicycle was tied to an early form of 'bosozoku' or unsociable 'biker' and, in this advert at least, the perception of violence attached to the bicycle was reworked for humorous effect.<sup>xv</sup>

A more comic or perhaps complacent image from wartime Japan is provided by Ebisu Beer. In this, a rotund gent in wasitcoat, pocket watch and resplendent mustachioes reclines comfortably beside an enormous cask of beer. It is an image of relaxed satisfaction entirely at odds with the frothing patriotism suggested by the casual observers of Japanese society. Instead of stoicism or asceticism, one has indulgence.<sup>xvi</sup> This also needs some context. At the start of the war, it was regarded as unacceptable to drink and, in some locations, there were fines for anyone caught consuming sak<sup>1</sup>. Once the government increased taxes on alcohol to help pay for the war, however, it suddenly became patriotic to drink. The figure in this advert may suggest that such confusions were as nothing to him and it is perhaps this lack of concern which made the image attractive.

## Conclusion

The myths of Japan which emerged from its war with Russia were sponsored by foreign commentators and by local 'intellectuals' such as Nitobe Inazo. The images included a Japan which was militarily powerful and, in the reading of Western observers, aggressive for territory; also a society which was imbued with the values of the military and ready to forfeit everything in support of war. The combination made Japan potentially a fearsome enemy. However, it has been suggested here that the Japanese army leadership had a quite different view of their forces and were themselves frequently at odds over the means to prosecute the war. If army officers were secretive towards foreign observers, it may simply be that the secret was how weak and uncertain were the commanders. Moreover, any examination of civil society shows how flimsy and unpersuasive are the myths of Japanese popular militarism. It is hardly surprising that in a war apparently for survival, the Japanese public contributed money and goods for the war effort (especially as they were constantly being coerced to do so by local officials, the police, and self-appointed patriotic groups). Simultaneously, however, they were venting their frustrations and seeking diversions. Indeed, instead of the rhetoric of powerful, aggressive 'bushido Japan' which grew in popularity amongst the superficial observers of Japan, one might suggest that many Japanese, including some army officers, tended to see only poverty and weakness, thus creating their own version of the myth of 'Little Japan'.

**[NB:** The Endnotes for this paper appear after the Towle paper!]

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## **British Observers of the Russo-Japanese War**

Philip Towle

The British armed forces made a greater effort to observe and to learn from the Russo-Japanese War from 1904 to 1905 than they had ever made to watch any other foreign military campaign. They sent a number of very senior officers to monitor the fighting and examined their reports with minute care. They produced three official histories of the war and a printed series of reports by the British officers attached to the Japanese.

There were several reasons for the extent of this effort. Above all, it was by no means unlikely that Britain would be dragged into the war on the side of its Japanese ally against Russia and France. The Anglo-Japanese alliance allowed Britain to remain neutral in the event of a war breaking out between Japan and one other country but obliged Britain to assist its allies in the event that a second enemy joined the fray. Had the Dogger Bank incident been any more serious or been worse handled, had the French government been as suspicious of Britain as it had been at the time of the Fashoda crisis, then it is easy to imagine that war could have broken out between Britain and Russia's French allies. It is also easy to forget just how close the British and Japanese were at this time. After the Russo-Japanese War the Japanese emperor was awarded the Order of the Garter, three Japanese commanders were given the Order of Merit, there was absolute euphoria at the Japanese victories in Britain, though not so much amongst British people living in Asia and the Pacific region.<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, the Russo-Japanese War also took place at a time when there was great confidence that armed forces could simply learn from

another war, if they put enough effort into the exercise. All military staff colleges were busy studying the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War, trying to mine them for lessons applicable in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The British armed forces were especially interested in the Russo-Japanese War because they hoped that, as allies, British observers would be particularly well treated by the Japanese. The British army was becoming more professional, albeit perhaps too slowly. The Boer War had badly shaken its confidence. If British soldiers could be held at bay by a group of amateur Boer farmers, then it was in serious trouble and had to improve dramatically before it could face a European enemy. The lessons to be derived from the struggle between Russia and Japan could make a major contribution to this process.

British anxiety after the Boer War accentuated the Social Darwinist views so fashionable in Britain and elsewhere at the time. Many officers and journalists went to Japan to report on the war determined to show that international life obeyed the law of the jungle, that Britain was becoming decadent and that British education and military training should be revolutionised to meet the dangers ahead. Japan was held up as a country largely immune to the forces making for decadence, so again Britain could learn from its behaviour and successes.<sup>2</sup>

The Russo-Japanese War also took place when the press was growing very rapidly, more rapidly than it has ever grown before or since. And the papers had the money to send reporters round the world to observe a war. Reading their reports nearly a century later one is struck by how poor they often were. Even those who were genuine experts on the country on which they were reporting were often wildly out in their predictions. Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace, the most famous British

commentator on Russian affairs, expected the Russians to defeat the Japanese with ease. But many journalists who went to East Asia were not experts, they spoke none of the local languages and they had little knowledge of Japanese culture or manners. Nor were they ever to have much to say of interest to professional military men. They were regarded as a nuisance particularly by the Japanese army but the Japanese were too polite and too concerned about upsetting their British allies to say so. Consequently, the journalists were kept waiting for months in Tokyo before being allowed to the front and, in the meantime, their impatience grew and they became increasingly hostile towards their hosts.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the enthusiasm amongst the British military to report on the Russo-Japanese War, the actual business of reporting proved messy and disorganised. There were conflicts between the British officers already serving in Japan and those sent out ad hoc to report on the war. Captain E C Troubridge was the Naval Attache in Tokyo. He was told that he was to be joined by Captain Pakenham and promptly took ship back home, whereas the Admiralty planned to have at least two officers covering the war.<sup>4</sup> Troubridge seems to have been a bombastic mercurial man, something which was to get him in trouble 10 years later when he was held largely responsible for the escape of the German vessels, Geoben and Breslau to the Dardanelles at the outbreak of the First World War. Later Pakenham was joined by Captains Hutchinson and Jackson. Pakenham was a successful observer, though the civil servants and politicians in London resented being regaled with his Social Darwinian views on the rise of empires with which he whiled away the time when there were no battles.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, Hutchinson seems to have become rather depressed in the Japanese fleet and had to be invalided out.<sup>6</sup> The British also sent Captain Eyres to the Russian side

but he was unable to reach the Russian fleet in Port Arthur and was eventually captured by the Japanese.

The tensions between the various British army officers sent to the front was greater than between the naval officers because there were more people involved. The first British Military Attache in Japan, De Boulay from the Royal Artillery had gone there in 1894. From then onwards the attaches had been relieved about every two years, though Colonel A G Churchill had served in Tokyo for five years from 1898 to 1903. During the Russo-Japanese War the Military Attache was Colonel C V Hume. At the same time, there were also a number of language officers sent to Japan to learn the language and familiarise themselves with Britain's ally. These included Vincent, Bannerman, Jardine, Hart Synnot, Yate, Calthorp, Harrison, Badham-Thornhill and Piggott.<sup>7</sup>

But the seniority of these officers was considered insufficient for the important work in hand and they were reinforced by very senior officers from London. These had lost their positions in the War Office following the reforms then under way in London in reaction to the Boer War. The most senior of these were Sir William Nicholson and Sir Ian Hamilton. Nicholson had joined the royal engineers in 1865; from 1871 to 1899 he served in India, rising to be Adjutant General. He was Director of Transport during the Boer War and Director of Military Operations in the War Office in 1901. He was promoted to CIGS in 1908 and Field Marshal in 1911. Hamilton was a fighting general, posted to the 92<sup>nd</sup> Highlanders in India in 1873 and wounded in Natal during the First Boer War in 1881. He was a member of Lord Roberts' clique and served as his aide from 1882 to 1890. He took a particular interest in musketry. Hamilton served in the Second Boer War where, unlike Nicholson, he

was again involved directly in the fighting. Subsequently Hamilton became Military Secretary and then Quarter Master General in the War Office. He was to finish his career as commander of the Dardanelles Operation and to live to 1947. He was a writer and a poet, and a military thinker, publishing his memoirs of his experience with the Japanese in 1904-5 as *A Staff Officer's Scrapbook*.<sup>8</sup>

Hamilton and Nicholson were incompatible. Hamilton regarded Nicholson as a desk-bound soldier, Nicholson regarded Hamilton as a schemer.<sup>9</sup> The language officers thought they should be sent to the front with the Japanese, rather than officers from London, because of their knowledge of the language. All this made for a good deal of tension and rivalry between the British officers in Tokyo. Some of the anger was redirected against the Japanese for their slowness in allowing the officers to go to the front.

The War Office also sent officers to view the Russian side in the war. These were led by General Sir Montagu Gerard and Colonel W H W Waters. Both had been Military Attache in St Petersburg. Waters, in particular, was as well liked at the Russian court as any Englishman could be in 1904. Gerard and Waters were both Indian Army officers but they were as hostile and competitive as Hamilton and Nicholson. Gerard died during the campaign, many of his possessions were stolen and his reports on the war were never published.<sup>10</sup> This was unfortunate as many were excellent, some of the best written by any officer. He had far more prescience about the way warfare was developing than many of his colleagues. Waters' reports were published, as were those of the officers with the Japanese and the more junior officers on the Russian side, Home, Mockler and Holman.

Apart from personality clashes, the attaches suffered from more general difficulties. Firstly, Japanese culture made for secrecy. They did not want people watching 'their' war, even if for political reasons they had to put up with them. They were reluctant to tell them anything about the progress of events. While the British expected better treatment than the other Western countries who sent observers, the Japanese were worried about giving the impression that their war effort was being directed by the British.<sup>11</sup> Delays caused resentment amongst both the attaches and, more importantly, with the journalists. Many journalists with the Japanese forces began by sharing the pro-Japanese sympathies of their countrymen and ended the war pro-Russian. On the Russian side the most difficult problems the journalists and attaches faced were bureaucratic inefficiency and ill health due to the insanitary conditions in Manchuria.<sup>12</sup>

Each war is sui generis. The common assumption at the time that observers could simply look at a war and draw conclusions was hopelessly naïve. Each attache went to East Asia with his own prejudices and the recipients of the reports also had their own attitudes towards questions of tactics, logistics and weaponry. This determined the way the reports were received. For example, Pakenham did not believe in centralised control of the gunnery of a warship. He argued that each gun should be laid separately. In describing a naval battle from the Japanese flagship, he maintained that the firing became more accurate once central control of gunnery had been abandoned. Pakenham's reports reached London in the middle of discussions about the new all-big-gun battleship, Dreadnought. The First Sea Lord, Admiral Sir John Fisher, was determined to equip this with a modern system of central



control of the gunnery. Fisher took from Pakenham's report on the naval battle of August 1904 the argument that future naval battles would be fought at very long range. He rejected Pakenham's comments about aiming. Fisher was right to do so because all effective naval gunnery in the First World War was to be centrally controlled. But the First Sea Lord was open to criticism from his detractors that he was making selective use of Pakenham's reports. He also rejected the claim by the distinguished American historian, Admiral Mahan, that the battle of Tsushima showed speed was not very important for warships. Again Fisher was right and his new ships were very fast, but that someone of Mahan's distinction could draw entirely opposite conclusions demonstrated that Fisher's analysis was not self-evident.<sup>13</sup>

The military officers also went to East Asia with their own prejudices and the reception of their reports depended upon the attitudes of the majority of officers in Britain. It was not a cavalry war and the Russians and the Japanese fought mainly as mounted infantry, dismounting and firing at each other with their carbines. In fact we now know that modern weapons, like the machine gun and barbed wire, had made cavalry charges suicidal. But most of the military observers argued that this was because the Russian and Japanese cavalry was no good or because the ground was unsuitable for charges, not because cavalry was obsolete.<sup>14</sup>

Even more importantly for the future, the war bogged down, as the American Civil War had done, into a siege, first of Port Arthur, and then of the Russian army at Liaoyang and Mukden. The Japanese broke through into Port Arthur by pulverising the defences with heavy artillery. They forced the Russians out of Liaoyang and Mukden by vast turning movements. Thus the war resembled on a smaller scale the conditions

of 1914-18 and both the Japanese and the Russians responded to this by adopting more extended infantry formations. Not all the British attaches were convinced of their necessity but such changes were reported by Tulloch and Hart Synnot from the Japanese side and by Gerard and Holman from the Russian. They also conformed with the changes introduced in British tactics during the Boer War. However they were bitterly opposed by conservative forces who rejected the idea that open formations were necessary to give infantry a chance of surviving machine gun fire from entrenched troops.<sup>15</sup> Conservatives preferred to argue that the Japanese had won the war by their immense courage and by their turning movements. Unfortunately their views gradually predominated and British tactics became more conservative as the Russo-Japanese War receded into the past. The consequences in 1914-18 were to be only too clear.

The British military officers were never very good at really penetrating to the roots of Japanese life, even though they lived so closely with Japanese officers. Some lived for many years in Japan and wrote extensive accounts of the experience; M D Kennedy and F S G Piggott are notable examples. Kennedy's account in *The Military Side of Japanese Life* was published in 1924. In this he specifically refuted the notion that the Japanese were likely to commit atrocities in Manchuria, Korea or elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> Japanese behaviour came as all that much greater a shock in 1941 and afterwards. To that extent the journalists and the missionaries living in Asia were sometimes more perspicacious about the political and moral implications of military behaviour because they were more suspicious. They were also often more willing than most military men to abandon or modify Social Darwinian ideas because they saw where they were leading. They did not associate with senior

Japanese generals, instead they wandered round Manchuria and Korea and already in 1910 they were more alarmist but also more accurate about some aspects of the Japanese military problem than their military colleagues.<sup>17</sup>

British military officers admired Japanese military virtues and wanted Britain to emulate them. They were hardly likely to denigrate the idea of teaching bushido in schools, if they wanted Britain to introduce a similar system. As Sir Ian Hamilton put it, 'With our education anti-military, and our army organised on the basis of wages, we are marching straight in the footsteps of China... The Japanese have behind them the moral character produced by mothers and fathers, who again are the product of generations of mothers and fathers nurtured in ideas of self-sacrifice and loyalty... If they wish to have every man in the nation a potential fighter they know they must begin at the beginning, and put the right ideas into babies as soon as they begin to toddle'.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

The Russo-Japanese War was observed by very large numbers of British officers and journalists who wrote dozens of accounts of their experiences. Apart from the official War Office History, there was a larger volume incorporating that material published by the Committee of Imperial Defence and an unpublished naval history was also written by the distinguished historian, Sir Julian Corbett. 10,000 copies of the military history were sold and 2,000 of the first volume of the CID history. Dozens of journalists' accounts were published in book form. No other foreign war has ever received so much attention from the British armed forces and few have aroused as much interest amongst the general

public. Major and accurate conclusions were drawn, particularly about warship design, but only when those analysing the reports from East Asia fitted them into the right framework.

It is equally fair to say that vital implications were often missed, particularly over the nature of modern land warfare. Had more accurate military deductions been drawn, the British army would have been better prepared for the First World War. But officers cannot be expected to approach such conflicts with a completely unbiased mind. To a great extent they see what they expect to see. In any case the geographical extent of modern battlefields made it increasingly difficult to develop a balanced picture of the course of battles. Even if they had drawn more accurate conclusions, the military observers' reports might have been dismissed in London. The implications of the war for cavalry, for infantry training and for the likely course of future wars in Europe were so revolutionary that they would have been angrily rejected by the arms most likely to be affected. In retrospect, it was ominous but not surprising that Sir Montagu Gerard's reports were not printed.

[NB: The Endnotes for this paper appear after the Lone paper Endnotes!]

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### Endnotes

[Stewart Lone paper: *The Japanese Military during the Russo-Japanese War, 1904-05: A Reconsideration of Command Politics and Public Images*]

<sup>i</sup> For example, reports on Russian and Japanese POWs in *Gifu Nichi Nichi Shimbun* (Gifu Daily News), hereafter GNN, 14 September 1905.

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- ii Pearce quoted from Neville Meaney, *The Search for Security in the Pacific 1901-1914*, Sydney 1976, p. 127. President Theodore Roosevelt's criticism of Japanese ambition is recorded from a private conversation with Shanghai barrister Venn Drummond in British Foreign Office records, F.O. 46/579, Macdonald (Tokyo) to Lansdowne, 30 December 1904; see also Raymond Esthus, *Theodore Roosevelt and Japan*, Seattle 1966, pp. 38-41, for an earlier expression of the same view.
- iii Katsura speeches distinguishing between Russians and the Russian government, Tokutomi Ichiro, ed., *Oshaku Katsura Taro-den*, (Biography of Prince Katsura), 2 vols., Tokyo 1917, vol. 2, pp. 202-06.
- iv On Kodama's plan for a new Manchurian command, Morimatsu Toshio, *Dai Hon'ei*, (Imperial Headquarters), Tokyo 1980, pp. 121-23; Oe Shinobu, *Nihon no Sambo Hombu*, (Japan's General Staff), Tokyo 1985, pp. 90-93; Yamamoto Shiro, ed., *Terauchi Masatake Nikki*, (Terauchi Masatake Diary), Kyoto 1980, pp. 225-26, 239, entries for 7-10, 24-25 April 1904. Terauchi quote, British Foreign Office records, F.O. 46/593, MacDonald (Tokyo) to Lansdowne, 2 August 1905. On the 1894 dispute over command at home and in the field, in which the authorities in Tokyo had recalled Yamagata from his post as commander of the 1st Army, see Stewart Lone, *Japan's First Modern War: Army and Society in the Conflict with China, 1894-95*, London 1994, pp. 40-44.
- v Terauchi diary entry, 15 September 1904, *Terauchi Nikki*, p. 269. On Japanese army restrictions on journalists in general, Ito Masanori, *Shimbun Gojuunen-shi*, (Fifty-Year History of Newspapers), Tokyo 1943, pp. 183-85. J.O.P. Bland, correspondent for *The Times* in Shanghai, wrote of Captain James' departure from Japan, 'The Japanese are evidently anxious to have his homegoing [in wrath] stopped.... James is a good man, but I fear that if he talked to the Japanese military men as he talks to [Japanese Consul] Odagiri here, their desire to put him under arrest is not entirely surprising!' Bland Papers, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, letter to Valentine Chirol, 19 September 1904. Bland's draft memoir, ch. 2, p. 10, quotes Morrison's wartime

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criticism of Japan, and his diary entry of 26 January 1908 records Morrison's comment on smashing Japan.

- vi Yamagata's refusal until December 1903 to accept war with Russia is evident in Katsura Papers (National Diet Library, Tokyo), item 70-65, letter from Yamagata, 21 December 1903. See also Tsunoda Jun, *Manshu\_Mondai to Kokubo Hoshin*, (The Manchurian Problem and National Defence Policy), Tokyo 1967, p. 224. Yamagata in 1899 on avoiding war with Russia, memorandum of 11 October, in Oyama Azusa, ed., *Yamagata Aritomo Iken sho*, (Yamagata Aritomo Memoranda), Tokyo 1966, pp. 254-55. Katsura and Yamagata on official reasons for seeking peace, Oka Yoshitake, *Yamagata Aritomo*, Tokyo 1958, p. 97.
- vii On increased army divisions, Yamagata August 1905 memorandum, Oyama 1966, p. 287; Oe 1985, pp. 118-19.
- viii Sir Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officer's Scrap-Book during the Russo-Japanese War*, London 1906, p. 15.
- ix A general discussion of education during the war in one prefecture is Tobe Hoobun, *Gifu-ken Kyoiku Hattatsu-shi* (History of Educational Development in Gifu Prefecture), Gifu 1991, pp. 123-27. For contemporary reports on schooling in parts of the same prefecture, GNN, 6, 20 & 28 June 1905.
- x Shirai Hisaya, *Meiji Kokka to Nis-Shin Senso* (The Meiji State and the Sino-Japanese War), Tokyo 1997, pp. 92-95.
- xi Gender confusion among Gifu youth, GNN, 7 September 1905.
- xii The apparent preference for postcards showing women, flowers, and humorous scenes, is evident in the advertisement for its midsummer lineup by the Nihon Hagaki-kai (Japan Postcard Society) of Tokyo, printed in GNN, 14 July 1905. Concerns about postcards of pretty women on soldiers at the front is expressed in GNN, 23 May 1905, 'Gunjin to Bijin E-hagaki.' Illicit erotic images, GNN, 7 May 1905, 11 & 14 July 1905.

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- xiii War movies, GNN, 6 & 8 October 1904, 14 June 1905; criticisms, GNN, 13 June, 17 August 1905; popularity of movie on Napoleon, GNN, 16 August 1904.
- xiv Tan'o Yasunori/Kawada Akihisa, *Imeeiji no Naka no Senso* (War in Images), Tokyo 1996, pp. 17-21. Draper's advert 1905, Obushi Hajime, *Shiryō ga Kataru Nihon Kindai Kokokushi* (Modern Japanese Advertising Through Materials), Tokyo 1990.
- xv Example of Kirin Beer advert, GNN, 7 August 1904; Pierce advert, GNN, 20 April 1905. Criticism of cycling, GNN, 7 April 1905, 23 May 1905.
- xvi Ebisu Beer advert, GNN, 9 April 1905.
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## Endnotes

[Philip Towle paper: *British Observers of the Russo-Japanese War*]

- <sup>1</sup> F S G Piggott, *Broken Thread*, (Galen and Polden, Aldershot, 1950), p.43.
- <sup>2</sup> 'From the nursery and its toys to the Sunday school and its cadet company, every influence of loyalty, tradition and education should be brought to bear on the next generation of British boys and girls, so as to deeply impress upon their young minds a feeling of reverence for the patriotic spirit of their ancestors.' Sir Ian Hamilton, *A Staff Officer's Scrapbook*, (Edward Arnold, London, 1906), pp. 13 and 14. For the Social Darwinism of the time see Homer Lea, *The Valor of Ignorance*, (Harper Brothers, New York, 1909). Glenn R Wilkinson, ' "The blessings of war" Depiction of Military Force in Edwardian Newspapers', *Journal of Contemporary History*, January 1998.
- <sup>3</sup> Philip Towle, 'The debate on wartime censorship in Britain 1902-1914', B Bond and I Roy (eds.), *War and Society*, (Croom Helm, London 1976), p.103 passim.

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- 4 Papers of Sir Gerald Noel, National Maritime Museum, NOE/4-5b, Selbourne to Noel, 13 April 1904.
- 5 Foreign Office papers, Public Record Office, London, FO/46/592, minute on Pakenham's report of 6 April 1905.
- 6 Noel papers, National Maritime Museum, 15a, Hutchinson to Noel, 24 November 1904.
- 7 See Captain M D Kennedy, *The Military Side of Japanese Life*, (Constable, London, 1924), p.358.
- 8 The publication of *A Staff Officer's Scrapbook* caused trouble with the Japanese who thought that Hamilton had broken confidence with them and they made some efforts to have the second volume stopped. See FO/371/85, letter from the British Ambassador in Tokyo, 22 February 1906.
- 9 This assessment of Hamilton's character was certainly encouraged by one of the other attaches, Colonel Aylmer Haldane, see the Haldane papers, National Library of Scotland, 2070/1/Box 1a, Volume 1, diary entry for 25 April 1904 and 2070/2/Box 2, Volume 1, Haldane to his mother, 29 March and 27 April 1904.
- 10 *The Russo-Japanese War, British Officers' Reports*, War Office, London, 1908. For Waters see his autobiographical work, *Secret and Confidential*, (London, 1926). For Gerard see *Leaves from the Diary of a Sportsman and Soldier During 20 Years Service in India, Egypt, Afghanistan and Other Countries*, (London, 1903). For Gerard's reports see WO/106/38.
- 11 Japanese fears on this score were increased by Troubridges tactless comments, see FO/46/578 Pakenham to the British Ambassador in Tokyo, 16 April 1904.
- 12 War Office papers, Public Record Office, WO/106/38, Waters' letter to Gerard, 30 July 1904 and letter from Major Home, a British attache who had to be invalided home from Manchuria, of 3, 7 and 9 August 1904.



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- 13 See Pakenham's report of 19 June 1904 in Printed Attaches Reports, Volume 1, and his report on the battle of 10 August 1904 in ADM/1/7775. For Mahan's views on speed see 'Reflections historic and other suggested by the battle of the Sea of Japan', *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, June 1906. For Admiralty views see ADM/116/3094, *Naval Necessities*, Volume 3, 'Memorandum on the Design of Dreadnought and Invincible'.
- 14 *British Officers' Reports*, Volume 2, p.526 passim.
- 15 *British Officers' Reports*, Volume 2, pp.12 and 177. For opposition to such changes see Major Hampden, 'Some lessons of the Russo-Japanese War', *United Service Magazine*, April 1905 and the *Army and Navy Gazette*, 16 November 1907.
- 16 Captain M D Kennedy, *The Military Side of Japanese Life*, (Constable, London, 1924).
- 17 See, for example, Price Collier, *The West in the East from an American Point of View*, (Duckworth, London, 1911), p.454. For missionaries' views see Reverend Lord William Gascoyne-Cecil, *Changing China*, (James Nisbet, London, 1910).
- 18 Hamilton, *Staff Officers' Scrapbook*, p.14.

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