

BREAKING COMPANY

Meiji Japan and East Asia

By Joseph M. Henning

In a famous 1885 editorial, Fukuzawa Yukichi urged his nation to “escape from Asia.” Japan could not afford to wait patiently for China and Korea to develop on their own, argued the Meiji era’s most influential scholar. To Japan’s strategic disadvantage, “civilized Western peoples” considered the Japanese to be akin to their backward neighbors. “If we keep bad company,” Fukuzawa wrote, “we cannot avoid a bad name. In my heart I favor breaking off with the bad company of East Asia.”¹

This call succinctly captured the full array of Meiji ambition: Japan’s leaders had set out to reform its political and social institutions and modernize its industries and military. The ultimate goal was to win recognition as an equal among the world’s great powers, a process symbolized in large part by revision of the unequal treaties that Japan had been compelled to sign by the United States and Europe in the 1850–60s. These treaties restricted Japanese sovereignty by establishing extraterritoriality and limiting tariff rates on imports to Japan. Fukuzawa and his compatriots believed that Japan, for its own territorial and economic security, had to construct a government and military that would set it apart from its neighbors and command Western respect. The transformation of Meiji Japan into a modern imperial power is a familiar story to students of East Asian history; less familiar, however, are Japanese efforts to transform Western opinion. In English-language publications, Meiji leaders took great pains to demonstrate to Americans and Britons that Japanese



SCHOOL IS ABOUT TO OPEN IN THE FAR EAST
Japan as the new teacher of modern military methods.
—From the *Tribune* (Chicago).

Japan, as seen by Americans, after the Russo-Japanese War: in modern military uniform, instructing its traditionally attired neighbors. In *American Review of Reviews* 32 (October 1905): 416.

political and military reforms were not merely a veneer of “civilization and enlightenment.” The Japanese contended that they had decisively broken company with East Asia and shared many affinities—political and racial—with the United States and Great Britain.

Efforts to reshape foreign perceptions of Japan focused on two issues. First, Japanese statesmen and scholars emphasized that their political and social reforms had produced a new, Western-

ized nation whose strategic interests coincided with those of the United States and Great Britain. Second, they identified racial similarities between themselves and Anglo-Saxons, in turn highlighting differences between themselves and other East Asians. These claims reached important audiences and influenced Western opinion. Japanese leaders published in leading English-language journals—making their essays accessible today for teachers to use as primary sources in class. These essays offer lessons in strategy, public diplomacy, and racial ideology in Meiji foreign relations. (Included below is a short list of useful sources not cited in the endnotes.)

At the turn of the nineteenth century, three decades after the Meiji Restoration, cabinet ministers and diplomats highlighted the extensive reforms effected since the change in government. Hoshi Tōru, once an activist in the People’s Rights movement and now serving in 1897 as Japan’s minister to the United States,² told readers of *Harper’s Monthly* that his nation’s new government, judiciary, industries, and public schools were evidence of Japan’s rapid progress. Just as importantly, he wrote, Japan had enshrined freedom of religion in its 1889 constitution: “We may not be a Christian nation in the strict sense of the expression, but we have omitted no effort to assimilate to our use the substance of Christian civilization.” The Japanese wanted Britons and Americans to recognize their new cousins in the Pacific.³

To an important degree, they did. In 1894, Japan had met one of its most pressing goals when British and American diplomats agreed to revise the unequal treaties and abolish extraterritoriality. (Japan would not win tariff autonomy until 1911.) Going further, Great Britain and Japan signed a military alliance on equal terms in 1902—the first between a Western and an Asian nation. In the treaty, the British also recognized Japan's political and commercial interests in Korea. Such accomplishments gave the Japanese other means of underscoring not only their kinship with the West but also their differences with East Asia. Kurino Shin'ichirō, Hoshi's predecessor as minister to Washington, informed Americans

that Japan, alone among Asian nations, had acquired "the benefits of western [*sic*] civilization." The result? Japanese diplomats pointed out that Japan was the first nation to be accepted as a sovereign equal by "the sisterhood of civilized states"; as such, it now had a unique responsibility. Because China and Korea remained mired in conservatism, corruption, and incompetence, Japan now aspired to introduce to them the blessings of modern civilization and progress. To enlighten Korea, Fukuzawa argued, first required the elimination of regressive Chinese influence there: thus the Sino-Japanese War (1894–5) was a "battle for the sake of world culture." Japan, former cabinet minister Kaneko Kentarō asserted, would "Occidentalize" the Orient.⁴

Having underscored the benefits of Japanese progress, Meiji statesmen also wanted to ensure that their victories over China and Russia (1904–5) would not inflame foreign fear of Japanese ambition. To many Americans, this new power in the Pacific, however Westernized it might be, posed a challenge to U.S. commercial and immigration policies. Kaneko and fellow statesman Ōkuma Shigenobu led the way in assuring the American public that Japan's new



CHINA IN THE BULL SHOP.

Chorus of Rival Shopkeepers (outside): "Wonder if he is going to buy anything here? We haven't got any orders out of him."
—From *Punch* (London).

China, as seen by Britons, after the Sino-Japanese War: unwilling or unable to recognize the value of technological innovations offered by John Bull. In *American Review of Reviews* 14 (October 1896): 405.

strength depended on free trade; thus the Japanese would eagerly continue to import American and European goods, oppose protective tariffs, and support the open door policy on trade in China. In fact, they noted pointedly, the Japanese were willing to shed their own blood in the defense of international commerce. By fighting Russia, Japan had preserved the open door for trade in Manchuria, a region that Saint Petersburg coveted for its own exclusive commercial interests. Japan's victory, Kaneko proclaimed, meant continued access and profits for British and American business as well as Japanese: Japan was not a competitor but a proxy for Anglo-American interests in East Asia.⁵

Immigration posed another thorny problem for Japanese diplomats. As movements against Japanese immigration flared in the United States and Canada, Japan continued its attempts to disassociate itself from East Asia. Hoshi tried to extinguish American racism against Japanese immigrants by distinguishing them from the Chinese, who had been prohibited from immigrating to the United States by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Because Japan had never permitted a "coolie" system of labor, he

wrote, the Japanese went abroad "as men, and not as numbers." The question of race was simply irrelevant in attempting to understand Japan: "the only legitimate test is one that estimates the earnestness of effort and the measure of capacity." By these standards, he observed, the Japanese and Chinese were as dissimilar as any two peoples could be.⁶

Some of Hoshi's colleagues, however, believed that race was not only relevant but also could be wielded to Japan's advantage. Continuing to look for similarities between Japan and the other powers, Meiji leaders identified significant parallels in their racial heritage and that of British and American Anglo-Saxons. Ōkuma insisted that ancient Japan, like England, had

successfully incorporated a variety of racial types—Malayan, Mongolian, and Korean—which had fused into a single nation. Just as Saxon, Danish, and Norman elements had together formed "the great Anglo-Saxon nationality," he wrote, Japan had winnowed out the weaknesses and sharpened the strengths of its racial components. An anonymous Japanese writer in the Chicago journal *Open Court* even contended that the ancient seafaring Phoenicians had contributed to Japan's racial stock. This hybrid heritage seemed to explain modern Japan's success in joining the circle of world powers.⁷

The Japanese also publicly used these ideas to emphasize racial differences between themselves and their neighbors. The robust ethnological backgrounds of the Anglo-Saxon nations and Japan contrasted sharply with the racial and cultural stagnation that the Japanese believed to characterize China, Taiwan, and Korea. This emphasis on ostensible physical differences emerged in Japanese popular culture as well. In woodblock prints (*nishikie*) produced during the Sino-Japanese War, the Japanese and Chinese appeared as entirely different creatures. As Donald Keene has pointed



"Don't you find those old-fashioned clothes kind o' warm, Nicholas?" —From the *Tribune* (Chicago).

With Russian autocracy as the sole anachronism, Japan now sits as an equal alongside the constitutional governments of Europe and the United States. In *American Review of Reviews* 32 (December 1905): 670.

out, these prints depicted Japanese soldiers, with European facial features and military haircuts, fighting heroically; the Chinese, however, with grotesque faces and pigtailed, were typically shown in cowardly retreat. From these perspectives, Japan stood racially equal to Western nations and superior to the backward Chinese, Taiwanese, and Koreans—new colonial subjects to whom it was bringing the enlightenment of civilization.⁸

In its campaign to join the circle of imperial powers, Meiji Japan enjoyed significant successes. On the battlefield, Japan demonstrated its modern military prowess against China and Russia, taking the colonies to which it believed itself entitled. In diplomatic negotiations, Japan convinced European and American statesmen that effective political and military reform entitled it to sovereign equality, winning revised treaties and the Anglo-Japanese Alliance.

In Western public opinion, too, Meiji Japan left notable marks. Prominent American experts began to argue in the early twentieth century that Japanese strategic interests complemented those of the United States and Great Britain. Naval officer and historian Alfred Thayer Mahan argued that all three nations shared the strategic goal of maintaining international access to the markets of East Asia—an objective opposed by Russia. President Theodore Roosevelt agreed

with Mahan's analysis and was familiar also with the views of journalist George Kennan, with whom he corresponded during the Russo-Japanese War. According to Kennan, reporting from Korea, imperial Japan was enlightening its East Asian neighbors, who were the "rotten product of a decayed Oriental civilization." And in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Unitarian missionary Arthur May Knapp observed that Japan had saved the Koreans from their own failures, which previously had left them vulnerable to the claws of the Russian bear. Echoing Japanese statesmen, these Americans declared that Japan was indeed beginning to "Occidentalize" its neighbors.⁹

British and American editorial cartoons, which teachers also might use as primary sources for in-class discussion, graphically depict Japan's turn-of-the-century success in breaking company with East Asia. On page 41, China is bewildered by British shopkeeper John Bull's array of locomotives and cannons, failing to equip itself with these weapons even after its humiliating defeat in 1895 by Japan's newly modernized military. A decade later (page 40), China and Korea still stubbornly cling to outdated tradition, as signified by their attire. Now, however, seated at schoolchildren's desks, they receive remedial instruction in military science from victorious Japan. Recognized as a sovereign equal of the

Western powers (page 42), Japan is now entitled to sit alongside its European and American brothers, all—except despotic Russia—brandishing the top hats and constitutions of civilized statesmen.

To explain such accomplishments, notable American supporters of Japan resorted to racial factors, again lending support to the claims of Japanese leaders. Knapp and Kennan concluded that the Japanese, in their capacity for progress, were "Aryans to all intents and purposes." Further championing the cause was William Elliot Griffis, the most prolific American writer and lecturer on Japan in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. He informed Americans that the Japanese were "the most un-Mongolian people in Asia," a composite race with little relation to the Chinese. Believing that the Japanese and Anglo-Saxons shared ancient Aryan roots, Griffis revealed that the secret behind the success of the Japanese was the "white blood" that ran in their veins.¹⁰ The work of Kaneko, Ōkuma, and their colleagues seemed to have paid off.

Although they were able to recruit important foreign allies in their campaign to reshape opinion abroad, this victory was limited in scope and duration. In the last years of the nineteenth century, when both the United States and Japan began

acquiring colonies in the Pacific, influential figures in both countries began to express growing doubts about the future of American-Japanese relations. As Akira Iriye and others have demonstrated, real and potential friction in commercial and strategic relations produced a new emphasis on rivalry, competition, and estrangement. War scares and physical attacks on Japanese residents of California erupted repeatedly in the years following Japan's victory over Russia. These were, in fact, the very trends that Japanese statesmen, in their English-language essays, hoped to reverse. Kennan, Knapp, and Griffis also had a similar goal in mind: they emphasized affinities between Americans and Japanese in deliberate attempts to counter the increasingly vocal American movement against Japanese immigration.¹¹

Two events symbolize the ultimate failure of these efforts. After World War I, the Japanese delegation to the Paris Peace Conference proposed the inclusion of a racial equality clause in the League of Nations Covenant. Japan, however, could not overcome the opposition mounted by Australia, Great Britain, and the United States, whose leaders feared the potential effects on their nations' immigration policies. At the conference in 1919, President Woodrow Wilson's opposition contributed to the demise of the clause and was an accurate reflection of mainstream American attitudes: five years later, Congress passed by overwhelming majorities the National Origins Act of 1924, which excluded Japanese immigrants from the United States on the grounds that they were not "free white persons" and thus ineligible for citizenship.

At the turn of the century, Japan had won Western recognition as a fully sovereign power but in the twentieth century could not completely shed the ostensible stigma of East Asia. Fukuzawa's concern had been prescient indeed: association with "the bad company of East Asia" continued to work against Japan. To escape, Japanese leaders had attempted to bend racial and cultural ideologies to their advantage. They found, however, that the bars of American and European racism quickly snapped back into place. ■

NOTES

1. Fukuzawa Yukichi, "Datsu-a ron," quoted in Kenneth B. Pyle, *The New Generation in Meiji Japan: Problems of Cultural Identity, 1885-1895* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969), 149. See also Miwa Kimitada, "Fukuzawa Yukichi's 'Departure from Asia': A Prelude to the Sino-Japanese War," in *Japan's Modern Century*, ed. Edmund Skrzypczak (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1968), 1-26.
2. Japan and the United States did not begin exchanging diplomats at the rank of ambassador until 1906.
3. Hoshi Tōru, "The New Japan," *Harper's Monthly* 95 (November 1897): 894-5.
4. Kurino Shin'ichirō, "The Oriental War," *North American Review* 159 (November 1894): 530-6; Takahira Kogorō, "Japan in the Sisterhood of Nations," *Independent* 53 (July 4, 1901): 1551; Fukuzawa quoted in Donald Keene, "The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95 and Its Cultural Effects in Japan," in *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*, ed. Donald H. Shively (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 127; Kaneko Kentarō, "The Far East after the War," *World's Work* 9 (February 1905): 5868.
5. Ōkuma Shigenobu, "The Industrial Revolution in Japan," *North American Review* 171 (November 1900): 678-9, 691; Kaneko, "Japan and the United States—Partners," *North American Review* 184 (March 1907): 633; idem, "The Far East after the War," 5869-70.
6. Hoshi, "The New Japan," 897-8 (emphasis in original).
7. Ōkuma, "A Summary of the History of Japan," in *Fifty Years of New Japan*, 2d ed., comp. idem, ed. Marcus B. Huish (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1910), 1:11-16; anonymous Japanese writer, "Ethnology of Japan," *Open Court* 20 (May 1906): 299.
8. Hoshi, "The New Japan," 897; Shinoda Masatake, "Japan and America," *Independent* 52 (May 3, 1900): 1050; "Ethnology of Japan," 305; Keene, "The Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95," 137-9. See also Stefan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: Reorienting Pasts into History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 70-82; Elizabeth de Sabato Swinton, *In Battle's Light: Woodblock Prints of Japan's Early Modern Wars* (Worcester, Mass.: Worcester Art Museum, 1991).
9. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Problem of Asia and Its Effect upon International Policies* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1900), xix, 41-4, 113-22, 150; Theodore Roosevelt to Mahan, March 18, 1901, *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, ed. Elting E. Morrison et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1951), 3:23; Roosevelt to George Kennan, May 6, 1905, *ibid.*, 4:1168-70; Kennan, "The Korean People: The Product of a Decayed Civilization," *Outlook* 81 (October 21, 1905): 409-10; Arthur May Knapp, "Japan's Ambition," *Atlantic Monthly* 105 (January 1910): 71-3.
10. Knapp, *Feudal and Modern Japan* (Boston: Joseph Knight Co. 1897), 1:5; Kennan, "Can We Understand the Japanese?" *Outlook* 101 (August 10, 1912): 822; William Elliot Griffis,

"Japan and the United States: Are the Japanese Mongolian?" *North American Review* 197 (June 1913): 721-33; promotional pamphlet, Folder 4, Box 1.2, Group 1, William Elliot Griffis Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries. See also Joseph M. Henning, *Outposts of Civilization: Race, Religion, and the Formative Years of American-Japanese Relations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 149-64.

11. Akira Iriye, "Japan as a Competitor, 1895-1917," in *Mutual Images: Essays in American-Japanese Relations*, ed. idem (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 73-99; Shōichi Saeki, "Images of the United States as a Hypothetical Enemy," in *ibid.*, 100-14; Kimitada Miwa, "Japanese Images of War with the United States," in *ibid.*, 115-37; William L. Neumann, *America Encounters Japan: From Perry to MacArthur* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1965), 112-34.

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