

# Varying opinions on the Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895) and the Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905) : Machida high school (Tky), third year (= 12th schoolyear), october 9, 1996

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VARYING OPINIONS ON THE SINO-JAPANESE WAR (1894-1895)  
AND THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR (1904-1905)  
MACHIDA HIGH SCHOOL (TŌKYŌ), THIRD YEAR (= 12TH  
SCHOOLYEAR), OCTOBER 9, 1996

Introduction and Translation by Peter Ackermann, Erlangen

I.

It is a principal aim of this volume of essays to help us consciously perceive diversity and ongoing processes in Japan. Rather than to focus upon some resultant state and pose the question as to the dynamics that led to it, it is the intention here to look at the dynamics themselves and leave open what they might lead to.

A great diversity of opinions in a high school classroom is nothing really surprising. And yet, when cultures are both geographically and in terms of their traditions relatively far away from us, there is a tendency to overlook this diversity and take little notice of the role and position of individuals for which it stands. I thus consider it necessary to stress diversity in Japan, and find it particularly interesting to observe diversity among persons of the same age as in the case of a Machida High School class.

It would certainly be foolish to interpret the eleven opinions presented below as a direct insight into the Japan of tomorrow. Young people in their teens, after all, are still a long way away from the status of adults in responsible positions. However, the opinions of these Japanese teenagers provide us with interesting insights into general feelings and attitudes – not only of the teenagers themselves, but also of their parents and surroundings – towards Japan as a native country. In particular I find it both very rewarding and important to observe young people dealing, like here, with questions that in the end invariably stimulate critical thoughts concerning Japan's relationship with the West (the "West" being not so much the "real" West, but rather a set of images that make up the "West" in Japanese eyes).

It was a remarkable experience to observe the importance attached by the history teacher at Machida High School to two wars that are all too often mentioned merely in passing. The tendency not to go into much detail about these wars is probably due to the fact that World War II has

imprinted itself so much more strongly upon the minds of present-day teachers and intellectuals, who usually, define themselves as representing – and feeling responsible for – “Post-war Japan”. That is, the identity these persons wish to give themselves is rooted in the aspect “post-war”, easily leading to a certain ignorance of decisive factors concerning pre-World War II modern Japan.

It is impossible here to give a detailed description of the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese Wars. However, for an understanding of the texts that follow it is probably necessary to call back to mind just a few facts.

The Sino-Japanese War must be seen against the background of Korea’s relationship to China, which implied that China did not perceive Korea to be a nation outside its sphere of interest, and that Korea expected China’s help in situations of emergency. With Japan’s foreign policy increasingly emphasizing territorial expansion – Japanese merchants and fishermen had already entered Korea in the 1870s – it was seen as necessary by Japan to have some degree of control over Korea. This inevitably lead to a clash with China.

In the 1890s influential parts of Japanese society welcomed the idea of a major foreign war, and felt their country to have become strong enough to wage such a war. In this context the following points must be remembered:

- a) In the 1880s the Western powers France, Great Britain and Russia were expanding rapidly – and by no means peacefully – into East Asia.
- b) Japan was eager to obtain recognition by the West as “equal” and revise what are known as the “Unequal Treaties”, which refused Japan tariff autonomy and stipulated extraterritorial rights for foreigners.
- c) In Japan in the early 1890s it was increasingly felt to be essential that the nation unite public opinion and end being politically deeply split.

Opportunity for war came in 1893/94 when Chinese troops were sent to Korea to help suppress local uprisings. This led to the dispatch of Japanese troops to Korea, Japan formally declaring war on 1 August, 1894. Victory over Chinese forces in Korea, the destruction of the Chinese fleet – as well as a commercial treaty with Great Britain and the prospect of seeing the “Unequal Treaties” soon abolished – worked together to create enormous enthusiasm for the war effort, and a strong sense of pride after achieving victory.

With this victory Japan had established itself as the major (imperial) power in East Asia. Moreover, indemnities paid by China to Japan enabled further decisive steps in the process of Japanese industrialization.

Russia's expansion into the Far East, however, soon became the major object of Japanese attention. This was particularly so after the "Triple Intervention" by Russia, Germany and France, forcing Japan to retreat from large areas on the Liaodong Peninsula it had gained in the Sino-Japanese War. This intervention obviously aimed at preserving the region for Russian expansion, a fact that meant humiliation for Japan and heightened anti-Russian feelings. The signing of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance – Great Britain being Russia's major rival – in 1902 gave additional shape to the will to isolate Russia.

In Manchuria, Russia demanded exclusive political and economic privileges, but was at the same time not willing to concede similar rights to Japan in Korea. Against this background Japan initiated the Russo-Japanese War on 10 February, 1904, launching a surprise attack on the Russian fleet, eventually driving the Russians out of Korea and pushing them back into Manchuria. Despite dreadful losses of life Japan won against Russia after destroying the Baltic Fleet in the Tsushima Strait in May 1905.

## II.

11 opinions on the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese War collected from 40 pupils by the history teacher and distributed on handouts for discussion within the class.

### *Opinion 1*

From a subjective point of view, war results merely in tragedy. As far as the Russo-Japanese War is concerned, it resulted in deaths and injuries in numbers far surpassing those of the Sino-Japanese War. However, these two wars did not only bring about tragedy. For example, indemnities paid by China after the Sino-Japanese War enabled the construction of state-operated factories, a fact that contributed to the development of Japanese industry and capital. Also, thanks to the two wars the abolishment of the Unequal Treaties could be achieved, and Japan became internationally equal to other countries. Was this not something for the Japanese

population at the time to be happy about? Put the other way round, if these two wars had not been, Japan might to this very day have remained a developing country. Our country would certainly not be very happy about that. Even though as a developed country it has mountains of problems.

From the point of view of the relationship between Japan and the outside world, small Japan had won a victory over both China, that from ancient times had dominated Asia, as well as Russia, a great European country. This meant that for the countries of Asia, that had become colonies, independence was no longer a mere dream. We can assume that this fact is closely related to the formation of the various liberation movements that came into being after these wars. Looking at things this way, these two wars were, we might say, historically necessary. However, the tragedies that occurred on account of them, and the fact that as a final consequence these wars led to the great world wars, are aspects that must not be forgotten.

### *Opinion 2*

I believe that the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese Wars had to be fought. What I mean by this is that if Japan had not fought a war of aggression, there is the possibility that Japan itself might have been invaded. In present-day Japan there are certainly many who would think, "Rather than invade another country it would be better to be invaded". However, for people to think this way they have to have been brought up in a peaceful world, without any direct personal experience of war, and firmly educated in a way that made them think of war as inhuman. To give an extreme example, if Japan were informed that China had positioned its atomic missiles so that they were directed against Japan, many Japanese would surely appeal to America or the United Nations, and, I ask myself, would not the use of force to stop China be considered? I feel this to be no different from the idea of "doing something before it is done to you", so typical of the age of wars of aggression.

Thinking now of [the noted poet and writer] Yosano Akiko [1878-1942], at the time of the Russo-Japanese War she took an anti-war stand, but afterwards, during the World War, her stand appears to have been pro-war. This appears to me as a manifestation of "calculating loss and profit". After all, in the Russo-Japanese War, in which Japan may have been victorious, she lost her younger brother. It would therefore have been

better for her if Japan had lost the war and her brother still been alive. In other words, her stand was centered on her own person, her own brother being more important than Japan for her, and this appears to have been the reason for her adopting an anti-war stand.

As we see, the more one gets into a desperate situation, the more one thinks primarily of oneself. Thus I believe that the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese Wars were unavoidable wars our country had to fight in self-defence. However, having said this, I do not mean that Japanese invasion was legitimate, and we certainly must reflect upon this fact.

### *Opinion 3*

I think, considering the situation of the world powers surrounding Japan at the time, that the wars were unavoidable.

If we look at the situation in the world, we can see that it was an age of competition for possession of colonies, in which powerful countries invaded weak countries. Such was the dominant feeling in Japan, and I think it was the general atmosphere of the time. In order for Japan, an island country in the Far East without natural and human resources, to obtain an equal standing with the West, it was necessary for it to rapidly become westernized, in other words to adopt policies to make it become like the West.

After the arrival of [U.S. naval officer] Admiral Perry [in 1853], and after the old feudal regime had been reluctantly forced to sign the "Unequal Treaties" with America, England and the other Western countries, Japan was intent on becoming equal to the West. Japan adopted slogans such as "Rich Country and Strong Military" or "Increase Production and Make Industry Flourish", being driven by the need to make the country rich and develop its industries as fast as possible, in order to prevent becoming a colony of the powers that were invading Asia. Industrial and military technology were about 400 years behind that of the West. In the eyes of the Japanese at the time, the sources of European energy were imperialism and colonial policy. Copying these Japan attempted to become a modern country.

Against this background we must see Japan first of all heading into the Sino-Japanese War. At first, rather than being interested in making Korea Japanese territory, Japan saw that, should Korea be invaded by some other strong country, Japan itself – a neighbour of Korea! – was



without any means of self-defense. The past had shown that in the war between France and China, China had suffered total defeat. Also, there was Russia that had got Sibiria into its hands and was about to take control of Enkaishū [Far Eastern Siberia] and Manchuria, in other words, Russia was adopting a policy of going south, and its presence and influence was about to make itself felt as far as Korea.

Japan, that had only superficially learned from the British marine and the German army, sent troops to Korea when the Tonghak Rebellion [i.e. one of a number of local Korean revolts organized by anti-Western groups in 1894] occurred. This led directly to the Sino-Japanese War. After victory, Japan requested from China payment of huge sums of money as indemnity. However, it was forced to give up the Liaodong Peninsula again after the Triple Intervention. If this had been wholly the result of insufficient military power, then it was natural that Japan sought to strengthen this power.

China, after losing the Sino-Japanese War, became a target for colonialization, in the north by Russia, in the south by France, and in the east by America, England and Japan. After the Boxer Risings [i.e. anti-foreign outbreaks in China in Shandong and the North, 1899/1900] Russia stayed firmly sitting in Manchuria and began to make its influence felt as far as the Korean peninsula. This was a problem that could not leave Japan uninvolved, as it was planning to extend its own interests from Korea into Manchuria. Japan, preparing for war, signed an alliance with England, and finally, in 1904, the Russo-Japanese War broke out.

Although completely exhausted after the battle along the Yalu River, the fall of Lüshun and the destruction of the Baltic Fleet, eventually Japan won the war. After that – with President Roosevelt as mediator – the Treaty of Portsmouth [New Hampshire] was signed, Japan (a) obtaining recognition of its supremacy in Korea, and (b) being given the [former Russian interests in the] South-Manchurian Railway. Thus Japan moved a great step forward towards becoming a major military power, and it began to expand onto the Asian continent.

History leaves no room for hypotheses, but we may wonder whether, had the Powers as part of their policy to invade Asia, turned China, Manchuria and the Korean peninsula into colonies, Japan could have followed the principle of non-intervention. The hearts of the Japanese people were dominated at the time by the fear of Japan itself becoming a

colony, and I believe this made all elements of Japanese society pursue the path towards becoming a strong military power.

#### *Opinion 4*

What were Japan's real objectives when it pressed for starting the Sino-Japanese War?

Japan, at the time deeply concerned with the question of how to abolish the Unequal Treaties, was informed that China had sent troops into Korea in order to suppress a revolt there, and in reaction to this Japan sent its own troops into Korea. Thus began the fight between Japan and China over the control of Korea. In the event Japan was victorious, and if we think about what Japan gained from this, then this victory, I believe – apart from giving Japan what was fixed in the ensuing peace treaty – played an important role in making the world conscious of the existence of the country of Japan.

However, just at this time Japan was forced through contrivances of Russia – that was intent on expanding into East Asia – to let go of the Liaodong Peninsula. This led to increasingly hostile feelings towards Russia, and as Japan proceeded to strengthen its military power, the path was set for the Russo-Japanese War. Intent on advancing from Korea into Manchuria, Japan concluded the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, Britain having the same interests as Japan, namely resistance to Russia's advance southwards. If we take into account this background we can see that both Japan and Britain were intent on the use of Japanese military power to control China and Korea.

In the war that soon broke out between Japan and Russia, Japan again was victorious. However, this war can in no way be compared to the Sino-Japanese War. The costs were infinitely higher, and in order to obtain the necessary money, taxes within Japan were raised to an extreme degree. On top of this, the lives of the people were deeply affected by demands for heavy labour. This led to revolts, and in the end resulted in hard shocks for Japanese politics, economy and society in all respects.

If we thus think of what the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese Wars meant for Japan, I believe we can say that Japan, blinded by just trying to match other countries, had only short-term profits in mind and went much too far. To sum up, I believe that the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars should not have occurred.



*Opinion 5*

My opinion is that the wars ought not to have been fought. I am sure everybody thinks so. And yet there are also some, probably, who believe that there was no option, and that therefore the wars had to take place. Certainly, if the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese Wars had not been, then Japan as it is today would be unthinkable. Possibly Japan would be just some country in Asia, and not one of the advanced nations of the world.

Having said that, I nevertheless think that it should not have fought the wars. These two wars were stepping-stones on the way to the First and Second World Wars. And in these wars we saw the exploding of the atomic bombs and the cruel murderings of Chinese and Koreans. An innumerable number of people died. Was it really necessary to go that far in order to create a Japan as it is now? True, after the Meiji Restoration Japan felt an enormous urge for hasty development. In those days only a very small number of people in Japan had something that can be called knowledge of the world. The average Japanese, I believe, knew nothing outside his own country. It was important, therefore, that Japan take a careful look at the outside world. However, there could have been other ways to do this besides focusing on war. I think Japan acted in far too great a haste. The speed of developments must have been overwhelming for the people at that time.

I feel very critical about the contemporary expression "Datsu-A Ron" ["The Discussion about Getting out of Asia", 1885]. Why should Japan have wanted to get out of Asia? Why did Japan think it necessary to have colonies, like the countries of the West? Japan certainly succeeded in "getting out of Asia". However, was that really the right thing to do, I ask myself. Japan is a region in Asia, and the Japanese are a yellow race of people, not a white race. And yet, Japan pretended to be something else than it was, giving no thought at all to its surroundings and just proclaiming, "We want to be like the West". As a result it did dreadful things to the countries of Asia. Japan really "floated away from Asia", lost its roots in Asia. After this, no matter what Japan has done, it has not been able to fill the enormous gap that opened up between it and the rest of Asia, so it appears to me. Would it not have been important for Japan to feel itself as an Asian country?

For these reasons I think the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese Wars ought not to have been fought. For Japan it should have been important not to become like the West, but to have aimed at being one Asian country among others and to develop harmonious relationships with the peoples surrounding it.

### *Opinion 6*

Neither the Sino-Japanese nor the Russo-Japanese War was a war that “had to be” fought. After all, the Sino-Japanese War occurred when the Korean government, that had been faced with a farmers’ rebellion provoked by the Tonghak Party, asked China to send troops. Japan dispatched its soldiers to Korea in reaction to the Chinese troops – yet Korea had not requested military help from Japan. In other words, there was absolutely no need for Japan to send troops to Korea. What Japan wanted was the domination of Korea. For this reason it – unnecessarily – sent troops, and for this reason, I maintain, it started war with China, that also was seeking influence in Korea.

As for the Russo-Japanese War, it occurred after hostile feelings against Russia had been aroused as a result of the Triple Intervention, which forced Japan to give up the Liaodong Peninsula it had gained in the Sino-Japanese War. Feelings of anger directed against Russia were intensified among the people of Japan by the use of slogans such as “Gashin Shōtan” [“Sleep on Logs of Firewood and Taste Gall”, i.e. “for the sake of revenge no hardship is too much”], and this finally led to the Russo-Japanese War.

The two wars were an outcome of the wish of Japan’s leaders to make their country bigger and also have colonies. If we do wish to say, “It was a war that had to be fought”, then it was not “a war that occurred because it had to occur”, but “a war that was intentionally made to occur”. If one had wanted to prevent the wars from occurring, they could have been prevented. But, I think, we must say that leading Japanese personalities wanted to fight these wars under all circumstances, and that is why they occurred.

### *Opinion 7*

If we consider the situation at the time, then I think that the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese Wars had to take place.

The Sino-Japanese War occurred because Japan was pitted against China over the Korean question. We must not forget, however, that at the time the Western powers were anxious to enlarge their colonial empires, and that they had already reached East Asia. Therefore, if these wars had not been fought, the region would have come under the domination of Western powers and might well have become a colony. As we can see in the “Datsu-A Ron” [“The Discussion about Getting out of Asia” by Fukuzawa Yukichi, 1885], those were not times in which one could comfortably think about the peaceful settlement of problems, and therefore I see these wars as having been unavoidable.

Concerning the Russo-Japanese War, we must note that, behind the opposition between Japan and Russia stood the opposition between Britain and Russia, going back to the Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902. The opposition between Japan and Russia concerned Manchuria and Korea, but then it was a time of the establishment of empires, and I think it would have been difficult to settle problems peacefully with Russia. I believe Japan only had the option either to make Russia an enemy, or Britain. In the face of this option it was probably unavoidable that Japan chose to enlarge the area it dominated in Asia and join hands with Britain. Had Russia dominated Manchuria, then Japan itself might have become a colony.

If we therefore take into consideration the economic situation at the time, as well as the fact that it was an age of imperialism, then I think there was no other way for Japan to survive than to fight these two wars.

### *Opinion 8*

The Sino-Japanese War was the first proper war of modern Japan. The Russo-Japanese War was decisive for the direction that developments in Japan took regarding the relationship with the West and the invasion of Asia. I believe there was absolutely no way in which Japan could have avoided these two wars.

After the collapse of the old feudal government – the Bakufu – [in 1867], Japan brought about the Meiji Restoration and made every effort to become a modern country within just a few decades – a development that took nearly a hundred years for the Western countries to achieve. Did such high-speed modernization not produce, as a kind of by-product, the

phenomenon “war”? In other words, the two wars can be understood as an inevitable development rooted in what had gone before.

Another aspect that can be mentioned here is the fact that at the time the Japanese government lacked stability. The Sino-Japanese War can be seen as an externalization of Japan’s internal political instability. After achieving victory in the Sino-Japanese War, Japan became increasingly hostile towards Russia in the wake of the Triple Intervention, strengthened its military power and eventually provoked the Russo-Japanese War. We may, therefore, say that in a way the Russo-Japanese War was a by-product of the Sino-Japanese War. In other words the Russo-Japanese War occurred because it had to occur. The result was that Japan started to become a genuinely imperialistic nation, and in the end this led to the Second World War, to defeat, and then to the postwar revival that produced Japan as we know it today. Therefore I believe the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars were actually of much greater importance than the Second World War with regard to Japan’s historical development up until today, and I see them as having been unavoidable wars.

### *Opinion 9*

I believe that the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars should not have been fought. It is true that the Sino-Japanese War resulted in great profits for Japan. There were gains with regard to domination of Chinese territory and the payment of indemnities, but then Russia played a leading role in the Triple Intervention that led to the loss of Japan’s powers over the Liaodong Peninsula. As a consequence Japan developed feelings of hostility towards Russia, and in the Russo-Japanese War these became more and more intense. In the Sino-Japanese War no direct losses had been incurred, on the contrary, it was a war we can think of as having brought profit. However, the deterioration of the relationship between Japan and Russia marked the beginning of Japan’s great mistakes, and it was, as I see it, the eventual negative outcome of the Sino-Japanese War.

Opposition between the Russian and the Japanese stand led to the Russo-Japanese War. The most negative aspect of this war was the fact that no indemnities were paid. Since no indemnities were paid the people were made to suffer. Although Japan had been victorious, not the slightest advantage arose for the people. Moreover, though Japan now leased territory from Russia and China, the profits gained from this territory were

invested almost entirely in armaments. On account of the Russo-Japanese War the already small income of the state officials was further diminished, in accordance with the Imperial Edict on the Build-up of the Fleet, as large cuts became necessary for the construction of battleships. This too meant that the people had to shoulder heavy burdens.

Capital was used for armament, and this in turn enabled the development of heavy industry, for example the iron works of Yawata [in Northern Kyūshū]. In this way Japan strengthened its military power, and, with it, proceeded to enlarge its territory. And then one day it was suddenly one of the Great Powers, and was unable to stop. For this reason I think Japan should not have fought the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese Wars.

### *Opinion 10*

All sorts of problems intertwined and led to the wars, and since these gave rise to equally complicated problems it is not easy for me to form an opinion. Wars as a rule occur because one's country seeks profit, and although such a situation is marked by egoism and striving for personal advantage, seen from the Japanese point of view we can assume that economic and other development was expected after the conclusion of the war.

It is true that after the Sino-Japanese War life for the farming population did not improve, but the textile industry profited in particular, and also the railway system expanded. After the Russo-Japanese War large business enterprises – *zaibatsu* – developed, having heavy industry as their core. As we can see, capitalism in Japan was shaped in important ways by these two wars, and this provided the economic basis upon which an imperialist country could be built.

However, the developments just mentioned turned great numbers of people into victims, and they took place against the background of the innumerable painful and cruel experiences that wars bring with them. It is therefore certainly not possible to have positive feelings about these developments. If these wars had not occurred, it is unlikely that present-day Japan would have come as far as it did, and we can also say that, to a certain extent, war and the development of the sciences went along hand in hand. And yet it must not be forgotten that behind these developments there were great numbers of victims.



*Opinion 11*

Whether the Sino-Japanese and the Russo-Japanese Wars should or should not have been fought is, frankly speaking, for me very difficult to decide. Therefore I would like to make a few comments on both positions.

a) The wars were unavoidable.

I cannot say why, but the Japanese do feel a kind of admiration for the people of the West. To be sure, at the time the countries of the West were more advanced than Japan in various fields of technology and with regard to organizational aspects of society, and they far surpassed Japan in military power. Japan, on the other hand, can be said to aim at excellence of personality, that is, a personality that makes great efforts (*doryoku-ka*). In other words, Japan is a *country* intent on making great efforts (*doryoku-koku*). Being carried along by the tide of the Meiji Restoration – that is, of westernization – Japan needed to make just one more step to catch up with the West. This step was “to fight a war”. Eventually, however, Japan appears not to have been able to stop after “just this one step”.

b) The wars should not have been fought.

It is indeed strange behaviour to think that one had to possess Korea or Manchuria. I admit that it would have been a difficult decision for Japan to withdraw its soldiers from Manchuria considering the importance of local resources such as coal or soya beans, and the fact that Russians were stationed there. However, first consideration should have been given to the fact that neither Korea nor Manchuria were any outside power's domain, and that they should also not be made one. Just as it is impermissible to take something away from somebody by force, it is equally impermissible to make another country one's own domain by using military power. The collective force of groups that do not, or cannot, realize this is frightening.

Also a large unit like a nation is moved by small elements called “human beings”. The fact that such small elements have enough power to bring about war is uncanny.



