 information about the early stages of Japan’s relationship with Mongolia in the modern period is sketchy. The evidence that exists, however, indicates that representatives of a number of different groups, including military, diplomatic, political and religious elites, sought to cultivate ties with Mongolia from an early stage, and that first contact between the two countries in the modern period probably occurred in 1873, only five years after the start of the Meiji era.

Certain common themes are evident throughout this formative period in relations between Japan and Mongolia, themes that embedded themselves in Japanese discourse about the region and remained persistent for decades afterwards. Some Meiji-period observers believed that Japan and Mongolia shared a common racial heritage; along with this the idea developed that there was something inherently romantic about Mongolia. Such an attitude is markedly different from the Japanese view of Korea; as Peter Duus notes, Japanese writers may have exoticized Koreans, but they never romanticized them. The intertwined themes of a common heritage and of Mongolia as a place of romance were continually revisited throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, until they became more or less fixed aspects of the dominant image of Mongolia in Japan. Moreover, as the notion of a supposedly shared racial heritage developed, it was in turn woven into the emerging discourse that proclaimed Japan’s solidarity with and leadership of Asia. Underlying the romantic perception, however, was the far more important fact that Mongolia occupied a vital geo-strategic position, lying as it did between Russia and China. This was the overriding concern for those in the Japanese elites who cast their eyes towards
Mongolia, though they couched their views partly in culturally romantic terms. Alongside geo-strategic considerations, another significant feature of the Japanese-Mongolian relationship that was established in this early period was the interdependence of military and civilian elements in the quest for greater Japanese control over Mongolia, an interdependence that continued until 1945. One way to investigate Mongolia’s significance for Japanese leaders in this period is to examine the activities of specific individuals who had both a strong connection to Mongolia and close contacts with the Japanese elites. The first part of the chapter focuses on the careers of three very different people connected with the Meiji military, political and academic worlds who sought to develop links with Mongolia in this period, namely Fukushima Yasumasa, Kawashima Naniwa and Kawahara Misako.

Fukushima Yasumasa was one of the outstanding Japanese military men of his time. Though no longer much remembered, he was once a household name throughout Japan because of a dramatic and well-publicized lone horseback ride he undertook from Berlin to Vladivostok in 1892–3. He subsequently had a distinguished military career, which included serving as the commander of the Japanese expeditionary force to Peking during the Boxer Rebellion of 1900 and as governor of the Kwantung Leased Territories. If Kawashima Naniwa is now remembered, it is as the adoptive father of Japan’s infamous female spy, the Manchurian-born Kawashima Yoshiko, the ‘Far Eastern Mata Hari’. Kawashima Naniwa himself, however, was one of the principal political activists in Japanese attempts to establish an ‘independent’ Mongolia from 1912 onwards. To understand the role he played after 1912, it is important to examine his career during this earlier period. Kawahara Misako is in some ways the most fascinating of the three, for her career illuminates the interplay of different Japanese ambitions in Mongolia in the late Meiji period and beyond, as well as contributing to the entrenchment of some important attitudes that influenced ongoing Japanese activities in the region. She was primarily a teacher who worked in Mongolia for several years, but she also engaged in undercover work for the Japanese military during the Russo-Japanese War.

All three were born in the town of Matsumoto in Nagano Prefecture, in central Japan, and in some way they were connected with one another. Post-war studies in English that consider Japan’s continental expansion during the Meiji period have paid little attention to their careers. Yet the lives and careers of the soldier, Fukushima, the adventurer, Kawashima, and the teacher, Kawahara, foreshadowed much about the tone and pattern of Japan’s later forays into Mongolia, and also contributed to the forging of an influential and popular Japanese image of Mongolia as a wild and romantic region. This image, in turn, arguably provided an important underpinning for Japanese activities in Mongolia in later decades.