Britain in East Asia and the *Japan Chronicle* network, 1891–1936

Britain’s relations with Japan during the period under review were neither static nor was British foreign policy towards Japan confined to a monolithic view. Rather, the relationship was in a state of constant development as different groups sought to influence foreign policymakers. In London in the early 1900s, the Foreign Office Far East Department took soundings on events in East Asia from pro-Japanese newspaper men like H.A. Gwynne of the *Morning Post* and Valentine Chirol of *The Times*, and organized subsidies for Reuters, long the leading British news agency in East Asia. But it also heard from the British Association of Japan and the China Association, and figures like G.E. Morrison and Lord Northcliffe, all of whom in their different ways were concerned about the Japanese threat to British interests in China and felt uneasy that the Anglo-Japanese Alliance appeared to sponsor that threat. Between the wars, at the Far East Department and the British embassies in Tokyo and Peking, Frank Ashton-Gwatkin, John Pratt, Sir John Jordan, Miles Lampson, George Sansom and others represented a group that was uneasy with the insistence of Foreign Secretaries Edward Grey and Arthur Balfour on the need to maintain the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, and clearly at odds with the Japanophile tendencies of F.S.G. Piggott, and with what appeared to be the placatory stance of Robert Craigie, Lindley and other envoys.

In 1918 those characteristics of Japan noted in Britain’s Paris Peace Conference *Handbook* would not, if they had been seen by the Japanese, have induced much confidence in their ally. Here we see the beginnings of a fundamental contradiction in official British views of Japan, between a realistic assessment of the nation in terms of its capacity and strength and a partial, impressionistic, usually negative view of its character:

The astonishing progress the country has made in the last fifty years, and the victories gained over China and Russia, have to some extent turned the heads of the Japanese, and made them think themselves superior to Western nations, and look down with contempt upon other peoples of the East.¹

In contrast, the *Handbook* described the Chinese as:
... a sober and industrious race, highly endowed with judgement, good sense, and tenacity ... The ideals of their intellectual life are not inferior to those in the Western world ...  

On the ground in Japan and China, the English-language newspapers took their own soundings on the character and ability of their host nation, and their editorial policy was often at odds with the line taken in Whitehall or Washington. Among British-owned newspapers in East Asia, the Japan Chronicle was consistently more critical of Japan and Japanese foreign policy, and the Peking & Tientsin Times, the North-China Daily News and the Central China Post were often more critical of nationalist Chinese policy than the Foreign Office would have wished. But such forthrightness was to be expected, since they were ‘on the spot’ and their journalists’ experience of the issues was often immediate and personal.

Peter Lowe has pointed out that ‘Insufficient understanding of Japan was shown by British government and British society in the 1930s. The qualities of character impelling Japan forward, the underlying tenacity, self-confidence, and willingness to endure profound hardship developing in its armed services and exhibited by its people were not properly recognized except by a few astute observers.’ Anthony Best has built on this perception:

... from the time of the Great War onwards, British policy in East Asia was characterized by a profound ambivalence about Japan and especially its potential threat to British interests. This arose because the policy makers within Whitehall held a double-sided image of Japan. On the one hand it was portrayed as a nation bent on regional domination, but on the other was seen as a backward power that lacked the resources necessary to achieve its goals. This dual image had its foundations in the Foreign Office’s day-to-day experience of Japanese diplomacy and the observations made by the embassy in Tokyo about the political, economic and social life of Japan. In addition, it was influenced by commonly held racial assumptions about the inability of non-white nations to confront the modern Western states. The effect of this dual image was that Britain did not seek Japan’s friendship, but at the same time did not view it as an irreconcilable enemy. This in turn helps to explain why Britain was prepared to see the end of the alliance in 1921, why it prevaricated about appeasing Japan in the 1930s, and finally why it underestimated the Japanese threat in 1940–41.

Best’s overview is framed by a discussion of British intelligence in East Asia, but it is helpful to our understanding of the newspaper networks’ influence on official perceptions of Japan.

Did the British-owned English-language newspapers seriously challenge this ‘double-sided image’ in official Western views of Japan? None of the networks discerned in this study did much to alter the duality that Best has identified because their editorial line was firmly, even