KAWASE MASATAKA, 1840-1919
The Longest-serving Envoy
[London, 1884-93]

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INTRODUCTION

Kawase Masataka was the Japanese Minister at the London Legation between 1884 and 1893; it was an unusually long period to occupy such a position. This was the period, particularly after the return of the Iwakura Mission, when Japan’s wholesale transformation was being vigorously carried out by the new leaders. Internally, Itō Hirobumi had just returned to Japan after a year’s study abroad in search of an ideal constitution for the new Japan, which was eventually enacted in 1889. However, the new objective of successive governments in this period in relation to Western countries was to conclude successfully a satisfactory revision of the so-called ‘unequal treaties’, which had been of the utmost importance since the first year of the Meiji period. Britain was one of those countries which had been negotiating with Japan: indeed, she was, in the eyes of the Japanese authorities, the most intransigent of all the treaty nations in refusing the Japanese proposals. While Kawase was in London, negotiating tactics changed according to the different preferences of foreign ministers in post. The Minister in London, therefore, held one of the most important posts in this period, requiring a competent man to carry out the instructions of his home government and to liaise tactfully between the two countries.

It is striking to find that, amongst all the Japanese envoys to Britain in the Meiji period, Kawase is conspicuous in two respects: there is no writing about him and he never attained any prominent job after his return from London unlike other diplomats who served in London. There is no biography about his life, nor is there a single article on him. To most Japanese people, even to historians of the nineteenth century, the name Kawase Masataka seems to be
quite unfamiliar, indicating his shadowy profile. Even to established diplomatic historians, his name has hardly been heard of, despite the fact that Kawase did serve for nine years in London. Even a Japanese scholar such as Inuzuka Takaaki, whose interest is, among other things, in Japanese overseas students in the Tokugawa and early Meiji periods, and has written biographies of Japanese envoys in London, Mori Arinori and Terashima Munenori, Kawase's predecessors, has not written a book about Kawase. Again, there are biographies and memoirs of his successors, Aoki Shūzō, Katō Takaaki, Hayashi Tadasu and Komura Jutarō. Many prominent men in the Meiji and Taishō periods, with some exceptions, such as Komura, left some sort of memoirs of their own to posterity, revealing glimpses of their inner thoughts. There are no such writings left by Kawase himself. In Komura's case, there are at least a few biographical portrayals of him written by those who had been close to him, but no-one has written about Kawase. To find out anything about him, therefore, one is confronted with a shortage of material, particularly in respect of writings which would give us an insight into his inner thoughts, leaving the historian a difficult task. There are of course official printed documents and unprinted archives. Several brief profiles of him are available, equivalent to Who's Who, but they are often copied out from previous information without much research and thus are not necessarily accurate. Some of them only cover leaders from Chōshū (Yamaguchi prefecture), his birth place, which are often very brief and tend to emphasise the early adventurous and heroic period of Kawase's life.

In addition, there is another problem that many researchers of Japanese men in the late Tokugawa and early Meiji periods face: the use of several different names by Kawase, typical of this turbulent period. Therefore, this short paper, focusing mainly on his appointment as Minister at the London Legation, has to rely heavily upon memoirs, diaries, autobiographies and the like of Kawase's contemporaries which occasionally mention him. There is no doubt that my information on Kawase may not be exhaustive and there may still be some interesting data on him buried somewhere.

EARLY PERIOD

Kawase Masataka was born in 1840 as Ishikawa Kogorō, in Hagi, Chōshū, the son of a Hagi Hanshi, a retainer (Samurai) of the Hagi Clan. Later, his name was changed several times to Otomi Seibe, Ubeda Saburō, Kawase Yasuhiro, and then to Kawase Masataka, a common practice at that time, particularly amongst those who travelled abroad under false names before the Meiji Restoration. He was educated at Meirin Kan in Hagi, an exclusive clan school for its employees' sons, where he is said to have sworn allegiance to the royalist group Son-nō.\footnote{His contemporary, Aoki Shūzō, also from Chōshū, harboured a bitter memory of not being allowed to study at Meirin Kan, as his father was not a retainer.\footnote{Almost every profile of Kawase in the pre-Meiji period describes his adventures in more detail than his later life. According to those records, Kawase joined Takesugi Shinsaku's internal coup in 1864 in protest against his own divided clan's decision to yield to the Tokugawa regime, thus determining the future direction of Chōshū's relation to the regime and raising Kido Takayoshi's position in the domain. In this internal battle, Kawase acted as the chief commander of a reserve army, while Ito Shunshuke (Hirobumi) also joined him leading another army. Kawase was prominent in supporting the Chōshū army against the Bakufu army until the ceasefire between them was arranged by Katsu Kaishū in}}