CHAPTER ELEVEN

RACE, CULTURE AND THE REACTION TO THE JAPANESE VICTORY OF 1905 IN THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING WORLD

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When Japan opened its doors to foreign ideas, technology and trade in the second half of the nineteenth Century, it became much better known in Britain and the United States. How far it was admired and how far it was patronized is still a matter of historical debate.¹ What is certain is that it was lavished with praise by the British media at the time that the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was signed in 1902 and, even more so, when the Japanese armed forces defeated the Russians in 1904–1905.² According to one commentator, Japan deserved the world’s gratitude for the benefits its victory would confer on Asia, while another claimed that the political and economic conditions in Japan would prevent it from taking selfish advantage of its success.³ Amidst the rejoicing the Anglo-Japanese Alliance was renewed and expanded to cover India. But this mood soon evaporated and Western criticisms grew, particularly over the behavior of Japanese traders, soldiers and officials in Korea, Manchuria and elsewhere in China.⁴ Japan was the first non-European power which could challenge the Europeans and so their reactions were a test of their tolerance and willingness to accept a major power with a very different history and culture.

The question is the extent to which the sudden and dramatic change of opinion was caused or exacerbated by either racial or cultural prejudice, or by the perennial suspicions which states harbor of the growth in the power of rivals. To assess this, the first part of the chapter examines articles about Asia and Africa contributed to the heavyweight British periodicals over the century before the Russo-Japanese War. These reflected and shaped the views of the British political elite. The nineteenth Century was the golden age of the reviews—when most important politicians

¹ Henning, 2000.
and writers contributed to their pages, including Gladstone, Disraeli, the 
two Mills, John Morley, Walter Bagehot and Thomas Macaulay. What 
becomes clear is that the ideas set out in public by this elite about race 
and culture were often not so very different from those prevalent today, 
but were nonetheless a sharp contrast to the behavior of many of the less 
educated and others working in India and elsewhere in the empire. The 
second part of the chapter then examines the writers, diplomats and cler-
gymen who commented on Japan around the time of the Russo-Japanese 
War to see how perceptively they responded to the Japanese and how far 
their vision was clouded by racial or cultural prejudice.

Occidental Attitudes towards the Outside World

The common view today is that our predecessors a hundred years ago 
were both culturist and racist, despising other peoples for some of their 
behavior and for their inherent characteristics, and that Western xenop-
phobia was reflected in the attempts to exclude Oriental immigrants from 
Australia and the United States. Thus, many would feel that such preju-
dices are the most likely explanation for the change towards Japan after 
1905. To assess this, we first have to decide whether our ancestors were 
culturist or racist and, if culturist, were more so than we are today. The 
distinctions are crucial: racial appearance evolves over biological time, 
cultural attributes alter over historical time; cultural behavior can, at 
least in theory, be discussed calmly and rationally, ill-defined racial feel-
ings are much harder to deal with. If Lyautey, then a young officer, but 
later a well-respected French colonial governor, found it difficult to look 
at the Vietnamese people because their appearance was “horrible and 
repugnant, both male and female,” there was nothing that the maligned 
people could do about it. On the other hand, culture and ideology can 
sometimes change over the course of a single lifetime. In terms of policy, 
racists and culturists are potentially polar opposites: the culturists want, 
as they see it, to “help” another people by encouraging or forcing them to 
take up their own culture and technology, while the racist despises them 
and might, at worst, want to enslave them or to destroy them.

The initial problems for a historian in deciphering attitudes are three-
fold: first of all, there was a chasm separating what the intellectual elite

6 Lyautey, 1932: 73.