Another Fin de Siècle

-The Boxer Uprising and a Discourse on Civilization in Japan-

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Introduction—the year 1900

With the end of a century approaching, we are by and large tempted to look back on the past, considering what the century has been like, although few are fortunate to live long enough to identify their lives with the entire century. Moreover, we sometimes go on to look into how things were at another *fin de siècle*, in particular at the latest one.

Once more the political horizon in the Far East is obscured. In China the rebels known as "Boxers" have torn up the railway lines between Peking and Tientsin, and foreign troops have been landed.¹

On the fourth of June in 1900, the last year of the nineteenth century, Erwin Baelz, a German doctor then practicing and teaching medicine at the University of Tokyo, thus filled in his diary. A movement, which began to show a threatening atmosphere since the middle of May that year, was now transformed into a full-scale xenophobic uprising—the beginning of the so-called Boxer Uprising. The standard interpretation² is that the rebellion was a xenophobic uprising by Chinese peasant youths in Northern China. Initially, the Boxers' targets were Chinese Christians, foreign missionaries, and even alien Manchu rulers of the Ch'ing dynasty. By 1899, however, they became the court's instrument to eliminate foreigners. The climax came in June 1900, when the court allowed the Boxers to enter Beijing. They then besieged the foreign legations, attracting the attention of the entire world.

Much literature has thus far discussed the uprising mainly from the viewpoints of international relations or Chinese social history; yet I would discuss it from a different perspective; that is, from the viewpoint of its influence on the formation of discourse on civilization in Japan at another *fin de siècle*.

Meiji Japan

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Meiji Japan was a turbulent era. People in government assiduously attempted to

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construct a powerful modern state before being colonized by the Western powers. Their efforts are succinctly put in such conspicuous phrases as Fukoku-kyohei [Enhancing the wealth and military strength of our country] and Shokusan-kogyo [Promoting industry]. Ever since the opening up of the country in the middle of the nineteenth century, equality had been among the main objectives Japan's diplomacy strove to attain. Being "equal" meant holding an equal status in the international society. As for Japan, the history of attempting to gain equality in the world was concurrent with the history of revising and relinquishing the unequal treaties concluded at the end of the Tokugawa period.

In order to accomplish the task, nothing was more urgent than, following the expression of a notable career diplomat, to "put our house in order", namely, "the modernization of her [Japan's] laws, her courts, her administrative system, her schools, and even her social conditions". Of particular necessity was the codification and development of law in a Western manner. China, for instance, was denied a chance to relinquish the extra-territoriality owing to an insufficient development in this area, although her own codification and development of law had in fact preceded by centuries such achievements in the West⁴. In other words, Westernization was the primary prerequisite for Japan to gain the opportunity to revise the treaties. Inoue Kaoru, the foreign minister in the 1880s and one of the key figures in the history of the revision, is reported to have said, "What we have to do is to transform our empire and our people like the people of Europe⁵," a statement which accurately sums up the atmosphere prevalent in government.

The year 1894, which witnessed Japan's partial success in revising the treaties, should also be remembered as the beginning of the Sino-Japanese war. How people in government at the time took pains to cope with the foreign policies of the powers was clearly and informatively depicted in *Kenkenroku*, a diary of Mutsu Munemitsu, then the foreign minister. The diary also gives a clue to understanding how the minister conceptualized the war within the context of the long history of Sino-Japanese relations and the contemporary world situation.

Japanese students of China and Confucianism were once wont to regard China with great reverence....But now, we look down upon China as a bigoted and ignorant colossus of conservatism. She, in turn, mocks us as a tiny island of barbarians who have recklessly and imprudently rushed forward in a mad effort to imitate the external trappings of Western civilization.....[I]t was patently clear to all that the real cause of friction would be a collision between the new civilization of the West and the old civilization of East Asia.⁶

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For the first time in history, Japan consciously fought a war considering herself to be a nation belonging to Western civilization.

The euphoria over the triumph of the Sino-Japanese war was soon challenged by the so-called Triple Intervention⁷. People in Japan were forced to realize "the reality dictated by force." Japan was thus faced with and challenged by "power politics" in the world. Of special interest is the fact that in addition to its political significance, the Intervention had a cross-cultural aspect as well.

I thank you sincerely for the excellent way in which you initiated the combined action of Europe for the sake of its interests against Japan. It was high time that energetic steps were taken and will make an excellent impression in Japan as elsewhere....[T]hat is clearly the great task of the future for Russia to cultivate the Asian Continent and to defend Europe from the inroads of the Great Yellow race.⁸

The German Emperor, Wilhelm II, sent to Czar Nicholas II on April 26, just three days after the Intervention, a letter containing this passage. They were cousins. Ostensibly, the Triple Intervention was a political means to maintain and improve the rights and interests of the two nations plus France in the Far East; but it also served as a preventive measure to guard Europe or the world of the white race against the "Great Yellow Race"; the idea of the "Yellow Peril" unmistakably emerged. Recent scholarship⁹ has convincingly revealed a crucial racial aspect in the Pacific War: an aspect of war between races. Still, the Triple Intervention had in this respect preceded it by more than forty years.

The euphoria was thus cooled. The interference testified that the power of a new Japan was no longer negligible to the Western powers. The Westernization of a small island country in the Far East not only led to some success in revising the treaties but put her inevitably into the world of power politics as well. Japan was somehow able to join the international society, in both a positive and negative sense. "The right of Japan to rank with the civilized communities for purposes of international law is now established." ¹⁰ Having thus briefly delineated the discourse on civilization in Meiji Japan prior to the Boxer Uprising, I will next focus on the event itself.

The Boxer Uprising and its Suppression

Despite the development of the uprising, no definite news was available concerning the siege of the foreign legations at Beijin. The telegraph service had been broken off since the tenth of June. The fact was, the German envoy in China, Baron von Ketteler, was assassinated by Chinese soldiers on his way to the Tsungli

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Yamen, the Chinese foreign office, in response to an official summons.

After receiving the terrible news, Baelz, a German doctor, severely reproached the unpardonable killing of von Ketteler, referring to it as "a most barbarous deed." One face of the Chinese, "the old civilization of East Asia", had emerged. When reading his diary, one gets the impression that he seldom got furious. Such was Baelz's indignation that one may then be tempted to wonder how other Germans, especially the Kaiser himself, reacted. Right after the Japanese triumph over China, he was enthusiastic about associating the Japanese expansion on the continent with the "Yellow Peril" even when the Japanese army did no damage to a single German. Therefore, it would not be difficult to imagine the extent to which the Kaiser responded to the murder of his envoy in China.

Addressing the detachment of German marines with 20,000 men which sailed from Wilhelmhaven for China, he made a remarkable speech. He notified the world of Germany's intention to avenge the murders of von Ketteler and the missionaries. The *New York Times* covered the speech under the title of "Kaiser Demands Revenge":

"The German flag has been insulted and the German Empire treated with contempt. This demands exemplary punishment and vengeance.....I now send you out to avenge the wrong and ill.....You will have to maintain good comradeship with all the other troops with whom you will come in contact over yonder. Russians, British, and French, all alike, are fighting for one common cause--for civilization..." ¹²

In this manner, the Kaiser did not hesitate to express outwardly his intention to revenge the barbarity of the Chinese; still he was shrewd enough not to forget to refer to "all civilized states," a strategy which made the speech all the more appealing not only to the German people but to those in "all civilized states" as well. That is, the framework he presented was the battle between the barbarity and the civilized nations, rather than that between China and Germany. The Kaiser thus emphasized the necessity of demonstrating "civilization" against "barbarity," although under such a seemingly ideal slogan could only be detected another barbarous intention: that is, to revenge the wrong wrought by the Chinese. "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." 13

Meanwhile, more than a month later, Baelz was informed of the emperor's speech. He wrote:

The German Emperor...is reported to have said: "Take no prisoners, give no quarter!" Just because rebel Chinese soldiers have murdered the envoy of a power which, in peace-time, stole territory from their country, a Christian ruler, and one who is always making a parade of his Christianity, charges his troops to murder blameless men in the same country even though they lay down their arms! Civilization of this sort makes one feel queasy.¹⁴

Baelz himself had resented "a most barbarous deed" of the Chinese--the killing of von Ketteler; however, about a month later, he was literally astounded by the response of the other party of the conflict--his emperor's demonstrating "the brutality and inhumanity." He even wrote, "Civilization of this sort makes one feel queasy." The Kaiser's concept of civilization was absolutely European; he did not mind revenging the Chinese, although this would unmistakably be another demonstration of barbarity. Baelz's diary accordingly attracts attention to the double standards of European concept of civilization.

The Kaiser's soldiers did behave in China to his satisfaction--the ruthless killing of the Chinese broke out. The *New York Times* reported:

The Germans have begun to disclose what they meant by piling in troops at this time.....Bands supposed to be hostile had been destroyed or dispersed by other troops....Finding no foe in sight or reach when they arrived, and seeing the harmless crowds looking up their homes again, the Germans became eager for combat.....Then the Germans....found the game they were searching--defenceless, peaceful people, unarmed and non-resisting, among whom killing was easy, and whose dwellings, after loot had been taken from them, made fine bonfires.¹⁵

In the end, not only the Kaiser himself but the German troops as well demonstrated "the brutality and inhumanity," a demonstration having nothing to do with civilization. One might then wonder how the Japanese troops behaved in Northern China, and what people in Japan evaluated the behavior of their troops, compared with those of the powers.

Japanese Intellectual Responses

The suppression of the rebellion in Northern China unexpectedly proved that the Japanese army is the most civilized army in the world. One may ask why.¹⁶

As early as 27th of July in 1900, that is, far ahead of the conclusion of the uprising, Yorozuchoho, a newspaper in Japan with a circulation of more than eighty

thousand copies, began to discuss the suppression of the Boxer Uprising and focus upon the reasons for the praiseworthy doings of the Japanese army.

The writer first looks back upon wars of the past: "even in the battle among civilized nations, the winner is sometimes reported to have killed non-combatants of the defeated enemy, an inevitable consequence to some extent." However, he is far from sympathizing with the armies accused of doing things immoral this time: "it is by no means pardonable that they acted like beasts just in order to satisfy their desires by raping....some of them did so in Tientsin not while battles were going on but after they were all over."

It is not so difficult to demonstrate bravery in the battlefields; but only the armies of civilized nations, who fully understand what humanity is like, can treat people in occupied land with affection after winning a victory....Now the Japanese troops in Tentsin have gained a good reputation, a reputation which is so prevalent both with the Chinese citizens and other people of the Allied forces that at the sight of a Japanese soldier no Westerner fails to bow, whether or not the latter knows the former in person. It is not only because of our remarkable military exploits but also due to the fact that our troop strictly observed military discipline and did nothing dishonorable. We are so sorry to see "humanity," which has been a constant topic among the Westerners, not exhibited at all in the non-Christian land. 17

The writer seems inclined to argue that the fact that the troops other than Japanese behaved in a mean manner was not accidental but could be attributed to their double standards of "humanity," although humanity is, according to him, one of the major components of civilization. "We are so sorry to see 'humanity,' which has been a constant topic among the Westerners, not exhibited at all in the non-Christian land." Despite this penetrating analysis, the writer does not explain further the origins of the exemplary deeds of the Japanese troops but instead presents too general an interpretation; that is, adopting bushido [a feudal Japanese code of chivalry] as a tool for understanding: "we are so glad to see bushido, no longer a popular topic among the Japanese, still exist deep down inside each soldier to help control the behavior of our troops."

The significance of this essay, in short, lies in the fact that the writer made, as early as during the rebellion, special reference to the significance of observing the military discipline and morals by the Japanese army. In the process, he discloses to his readers the uncivilized behavior of the civilized nations and criticizes them based on an assumption that their deeds probably resulted from the *double* standards of

humanity or civilization among the Westerners. Thus he succeeded in helping a new discourse emerge and prevail that the Japanese are *constantly* civilized. The defect in this article, on the other hand, is that he somewhat casually attributes their exemplary behavior solely to the deep-rooted tradition of *bushido*. Furthermore, he does not sufficiently discuss why *only* the Japanese were able to observe military discipline in such a remarkable manner.

About eight months later, *Nihonjin*, a leading magazine in Japan, succeeded to making a closer analysis of the difference of behavior found among Japanese and foreign soldiers, in particular German and Russian.

It is now evident that the Russian and German troops in Northern China looted, raped, and massacred innocent people--a cruel behavior far beyond imagination. Therefore, some people in Japan, upon hearing the news, expressed strong indignation, saying that such cruelty should be far from what people of civilized nations do....The reason people in Japan are severely criticizing such cruelty is that their deeds simply seem to them to be unimaginably brutal and against humanity, not that they are seriously thinking about what measures they should take to prevent such deeds from being repeated in the future...¹⁸

After roughly summarizing the general reaction to the news of the disgraceful deeds of German and Russian troops, the writer presents an intriguing analysis of why people in Japan blame them for those atrocities. In short, he points out that the reaction was due to the unimaginable scale of the atrocities, not based on a profound understanding of the incident. He then goes on to a sort of "philosophical investigation": first, the study of national characteristics.

The writer's standpoint is that, although each individual in a nation has a different character, yet national characteristics could be discerned. With regard to the Japanese, he contends that "frank disposition," "warm-heartedness," and "bravery to fight for the right" fall into this category. Then he attributes to these national characteristics the difficulty the Japanese have in understanding the atrocities committed by the foreign troops. On the other hand, he insists the primary characteristic of the Westerners is, in contrast to the Japanese, "a disposition to be cruel." Too broad a framework, one would say, to be sure, because he does not distinguish between Westerners; nevertheless the following interpretation is worth considering.

It is a received understanding that treating others cruelly is against humanity; Westerners stick to this understanding with the white race.

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However, when it comes to other races, Westerners have not yet thought it necessary to apply this rule to them. They have not found themselves to be wrong even after exploiting other lands and treating those people cruelly...¹⁹

With these words, the writer makes a severe criticism of the double standards of civilization and even of the history of Western colonialism: a criticism also found in Baelz's diary.

Then he refers to another national characteristic of the Japanese; that is, a strong tendency to respect things foreign. Under the Westernization policy in the Meiji period, the object of admiration changed from things Chinese to things Western. Besides this national tendency, what should be born in mind is the youthfulness of the Japanese army, only about three decades since its birth; in other words, inexperience, in particular in foreign lands. This inexperience forced the Japanese army to station abroad as if in Japan, a strategy not available in the case of prolonged wars abroad. Taking this historical background into account, the writer contends that, with the increase of opportunities to station together with foreign troops, the possibility cannot be denied that the Japanese army, with such national characteristics of admiring things foreign, may act in the same way as the foreign troops. Simply put, the writer, instead of praising with enthusiasm the fact that the Japanese troops observed good military discipline and morals and gained a good reputation, implies that inexperience abroad may have prevented the Japanese troops from behaving immorally. He is thus warning his people of the possibility that Japan's armies may in the future follow the cruel foreign manners, which they are now severely criticizing.

In conclusion, we are afraid that the merit of our national characteristics might be used in a wrong direction in the future; that is, the merit of remarkably quick adaptability will enable our people to imitate the evil customs of foreigners with no difficulty so that some day they too will not feel guilty for behaving in the same manner as the foreigners, which the Japanese are now blaming for their cruel nature. Unless we now warn our people of this possibility well before the situation gets worse, we are sure to have deep regret in the future; how could we neglect giving careful consideration to the brutal deeds of foreign troops in Northern China?²⁰

The writer thus reiterated the danger inherent in his nation. This remarkable adaptability helped Japan to join the civilized nations with astonishing rapidity. The road to civilization in Japan began by imitating things foreign; and the more

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frequently the Japanese get in touch with foreigners in the future, the more possibility increases that they might be affected by the foreigners both in respectable and disgraceful ways. Considering what happened in the first half of this century, the writer of this essay, Kuga Katunan, was admirably far-sighted.

The third text²¹ to be discussed is originally a lecture given in December of 1901, the year which at last witnessed the conclusion of the Boxer Uprising. Mori Ogai, a literary figure of prominence in Meiji and Taisho eras, delivered it at Kaiko-sha, a society of military officers, in Kokura-city in Kyushu. Ogai is quite different from the other two writers discussed earlier. First, being a military doctor as a profession, he was within the Establishments in a broad sense, whereas the rest were literally outside the government. In addition, Ogai had a considerable experience of studying several years in Germany in his twenties; even after returning home, he continued his research on the situations in Europe chiefly by reading journals and books ordered from Germany. In short, he was an exceptional Germany specialist in Meiji and Taisho Japan.

Besides these differences in their backgrounds, the audience itself is quite different. This lecture, although published some years later for the general readership, was at first intended exclusively for the officers in his division to enlighten the Japanese military. Ogai's perspective is from the viewpoint of comparative culture. At the outset, he refers to the fact that in the very suppression the armies of different nationalities congregated in the same place for the same purpose. Next he goes on to present an interesting comparison: the Crusades as a predecessor of the expeditionary forces dispatched to suppress the uprising. In terms of comparative culture, Ogai contends, the Crusades functioned as a mediator that allowed the customs of one country to spread to another. After introducing this striking comparison, Ogai then attracts listeners' attention to one aspect revealed in the suppression--cross-cultural contacts with foreigners.

Prior to the Boxer Uprising, contacts with foreign cultures were quite limited in Japan: by reading foreign books, learning from foreign teachers in Japan, and for a small number of people, by studying or traveling abroad. In other words, Ogai sheds fresh light on the fact that Japanese contact with foreign cultures has thus far been virtually second hand. Studying foreign armies in the Japanese army was no exception; Ogai himself was assigned to this type of research within the army, chiefly by perusing foreign books in related fields. Given the history of foreign contacts in Japan, fighting with the powers to suppress the uprising served as a cross-cultural experience for the Japanese on a large scale for the first time in history from generals down to low-ranking soldiers.

By the time this lecture was delivered, a discourse had already prevailed that the

172 (51) German army, despite its strict observance of military discipline, acted against morals in China. The easiest approach to comprehending the occurrence is, it seems, to separate military discipline from morals; that is, maintaining that one could observe military discipline even without keeping high moral standards.

Ogai was, above all, a military officer of Imperial Japan. As a military man, Ogai attempts to make full use of this unprecedented cross-cultural experience in order to improve the Japanese army. Thus, he must reject such an easy, frivolous understanding that military discipline could be independent of morals. A discourse like this is, after all, detrimental to the Japanese army of the future. He considers himself to be responsible for repudiating in a logical manner the view that military discipline could be maintained independently of morals.

On the other hand, his way of solving the question "why did the troops, with high moral standards, bring about those disgraceful deeds?" is quite convincing. Ogai begins by enumerating three reasons:

First of all, the feeling of the white race toward yellow, black, and brown races is, compared to our feeling toward the Chinese, extremely cold; in addition, it is quite different from the feeling among the same white race. Why then does this difference occur? Above all, whites believe themselves to be the best in the world. Besides, they go to primary school with the Bible, whether or not they completely believe in Christianity. Within and without school, teachers and parents try to inculcate their students and children with an idea that pagans should be despised. Then comes a second main reason. Usually whites look down on prostitutes as mere things treating them with extreme coldness and disdain, while Japanese try to be liked and even to be loved by prostitutes. Accordingly, they do not think it against morality to violate them. Given this custom in their own countries, it is no wonder that they apply it to the colored races, especially in defeated lands. Thirdly, European soldiers are quite unconventional in pleasure quarters and do not think it rude, except at formal situations, to talk with friends about their experience with prostitutes. They do not regret violating prostitutes....But their feeling toward respectable women among the same race is, compared to that of the Japanese, extremely admirable....²²

With these words Ogai makes a meaningful analysis of one aspect revealed in the suppression of the Boxer Uprising--a racial aspect. Here he presents two significant tendencies found in people in the West: a superiority complex against colored races and a contempt for prostitutes, whereas they respect women in general more than the Japanese do.

Ogai, however, seems to refrain from developing his interpretation any further. His contention could be stated as follows: colored women are to the white race, regardless of social rank, what prostitutes in their countries are to them. Precisely because of this, the German troops behaved brutally in China, though in fact they observed a strict military discipline. He concludes the lecture, by reiterating his understanding:

I have spoken here to help prevent the misunderstanding that military discipline can be maintained without adhering to moral behavior.²³

Epilogue--aftermath

Yorozuchoho was one of the first media to report to Japanese citizens the praiseworthy deeds of the Japanese expeditionary army. At about the same time as Ogai's lecture, however, the same newspaper then disclosed the fact that the Japanese army had also looted in the occupied land. A recent study on the uprising says:

Once in the capital, everyone joined in the looting: troops of all nationalities (though the Europeans were the worst, and the Japanese the best-behaved), and missionaries who would later justify their activities in articles with such delightful titles as "The Ethics of Loot." ²⁴

The looting was inevitable and even excusable to some extent because the army then depended mainly upon self-subsistence in the field; but what the newspaper found totally inexcusable was the fact that some generals and officers participating in the expedition took advantage of the looting in Beijin to line their own pockets to a considerable degree. After the expedition, some did become extremely wealthy. Regrettably, the decline of the Japanese Imperial Army began here.

In terms of diplomatic history, the most significant outcome of the Boxer Uprising is the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-5. In terms of Japanese intellectual history, the new conceptualization of civilization is of vital importance. Besides the Russo-Japanese War, the next five decades witnessed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, the annexation of Korea, World War I, the Versailles Conference, the War in the continent, and the Pacific War. All of these historical events could be discussed in terms of discourses on civilization; still, it could be said that major discourses had already appeared at the time of the Boxer Uprising.

Nakae Chomin, another Meiji intellectual, refers to the discourse:

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Recently our army stationed together with the Powers in Northern China. While engaged in the operation together, the other Powers revealed a barbaric character. Our soldiers then came to know for the first time in history that the Western civilization was magnificent only in material goods but, in terms of morals, the level of their civilization was the same as or even lower than our civilization.²⁵

The reality of Western civilization led the Japanese to a self-confidence that gradually developed into arrogance. Perhaps because of the failure to grasp fully the significant interpretations and warnings by Japanese intellectuals at the *fin de siècle* and beyond, the aftermath of the Boxer Uprising led, regrettably, to the decline and fall of Imperial Japan.

Notes

I am deeply grateful to Dr. Patricia Wells, my colleague, for her devoted help with polishing my English.

- 1 Erwin Baelz, Awakening Japan: The Diary of a German Doctor: Erwin Baelz (Bloomington, 1974), p. 128.
- 2 Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan vol. I (Tokyo, 1983), p. 166.
- 3 Ishii, Kikujiro "The permanent Bases of Japanese Foreign Policy" in Foreign Affairs. Vol.11 (January, 1933), p. 220.
- 4 Christopher Thorne, The Issue of War (New York, 1985), p. 28.
- 5 Marius B. Jansen, "Modernization and Foreign Policy in Meiji Japan" in Robert E. Ward, ed., *Political Development in Modern Japan* (Princeton, 1968), p. 174.
- 6 Mutsu, Munemitsu, Kenkenroku translated by Gordon Mark Berger (1982, Princeton), pp. 27-8.
- 7 A joint ultimatum delivered to Japan by Russia, France, and Germany to return to the Liaotung Peninsula to China on the grounds that the cession endangered Peking and invalidated Korean independence. [Concise Dictionary of Modern Japanese History (1984, California)]
- 8 N. F. Grant ed. The Kaiser's Letters to the Tsar (London, 1914) p. 10.
- 9 See John W. Dower War Without Mercy--Race and Power in the Pacific War (New York, 1986).
- 10 William Edward Hall, A Treatise on International Law Fifth Edition (Oxford, 1904), p. 42.
- 11 Baelz, op. cit., p. 132.
- 12 The New York Times, 4th July, 1900.
- 13 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations* (New York, 1986), p. 256.
- 14 Baelz, op. cit., p. 137.
- 15 The New York Times, 28th October, 1900.
- 16 Yorozuchoho, 27th July, 1900.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 "Ikani Gaihei no Zangyaku o Miru [How to Interpret the Cruelty of Foreign Troops]" in *Nihonjin* (vol. 134, 1901-3-15), p. 1.
- 19 op. cit., p. 4.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Mori, Ogai, "Hokushinjiken no Ichimen no Kansatsu [One Aspect Observed in the Boxer Rebellion]" in Ogai Zenshu, Vol. 19, 1952.
- 22 Ogai, op. cit. pp. 176-8.
- 23 Ogai, op. cit. p. 179.
- 24 Joseph W. Esherick, The Origin of the Boxer Uprising (California, 1987), p. 310.
- 25 NAKAE Chomin, "Ichinen Yuhan" in Nakae Chomin Zenshu, vol. 10, 1983 p. 207.

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