

# The Far East in the Eyes of two Austrian Travellers in early Meiji period

Peter Pantzer

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It has been almost 500 years since Europe had its first and close look on Japan. The only knowledge about this country so far was based on a short report in the writings of Marco Polo using only secondary sources such as hearsay since he never set foot on Japanese soil. And that was it. However, ample information arrived in Europe from the moment when European powers extended their economic and political interests across the oceans – the leading countries at the beginning were Portugal and Spain. It is the so-called Christian century as some historians use it for describing the era between the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century in respect to the Japanese encounter with the West.

Thereafter, a lot of knowledge about Japan and China spread into Europe. Many European writers excelled each other to convey information on Japan and China. The most interesting thing is that the information was astonishingly correct and very much detailed by way of eyewitnesses. Good examples are Arnoldus Montanus (1625-1683) or Bernhard Varenius (1622-1651), who studied and published their treatises on Japan in the Netherlands, or Martinus Martini (1614-1661) on China (*Zeitung aus der neuen Welt oder Chinesischen Königreichen*, Augsburg 1654), another excellent scholar who even lived years in the country he wrote about. Dr Miyata will, as an example, talk more concise about this fascinating topic by using European texts on Hideyoshi, his family, his deeds - in some cases wrong ones, mostly written in German language. It was only quite a short time after Hideyoshi's death that all these writings appeared in the West.

Certainly, there were misinterpretations in European texts on Japan; occasional misunderstanding due to different cultural values or due to unawareness of the fact that some sources were rather fairy tales than the realistic renditions of proofed facts.

Nevertheless, most of the early reports from Japan - or better to say - on Japan are trustworthy. Due to the seclusion policy of the Tokugawa shogunate, some information became later quite diffuse. Early maps are sometimes better than later ones: In course of time, the Korean peninsula turned into an island although it had been displayed correctly in preceding decades, and Hokkaido disappeared from the Western maps. Furthermore, many names were so corrupted even not to say “spoofed” that one needs to use imagination to figure out for what they actually stand. To exaggerate to some extent, the intellectual world had been waiting for such sophisticated figures such as Siebold so as to polish up the knowledge on Japan, and update all the findings about this fascinating country.

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Since the space is limited, my paper concentrates on the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when a bunch of different Western countries knocked at Japan's door, and Japan eventually opened it - or rather, Japan was forced to open it. My remarks are made more or less only upon the perception of Japan in comparison to China. Besides the Spaniards, who travelled from America to the west coast of the Pacific Ocean and eventually arrived in Japan on their way back to their country, all other ships from Europe inevitably passed by the Chinese coasts and eventually stopped in Chinese harbours on their way to Japan. As a matter of fact, they became automatically inclined to compare those two countries in terms of customs as well as the behavioural patterns of their respective populations.

When we travel from Europe to Japan today, we land at the International Airport in Narita or the Kansai International Airport near Osaka. Thus, there is not a “must” for comparing Japan with a neighbouring country besides our own country, if any. However, in those days of seafaring that sailing ships had to travel for weeks and months, it was inevitable to consider differences and/or similarities between these two countries.

Did Westerners make a difference in judging Japan and China, or not? That is our interest. Precisely, was the

glimpse on Japan and China correct? Was it near to reality? Or was it full of prejudice, overwhelming praise or other extremes?

Certainly, distinction was rarely made between China and Japan from the distance. Even nowadays, despite the ample possibilities to learn, people mix up the various aspects of these two countries from culture to others. In the palaces built in Europe during the baroque period, a good number of the Far Eastern porcelain was displayed, since they were fitting the taste of that time. In a word, that was fashionable. In some exotic rooms, called “Chinese” cabinet, more Japanese porcelain than Chinese are to be found; they were imported by the Dutch from Hirado, later Deshima, via the Netherlands. On the contrary, in some other cabinets, called “Japanese”, there might be much more Chinese tableware and vases than Japanese ones. There was not much distinction in Europe between Japanese and Chinese art, and after all, Kanji-syllables were a closed book for Westerners.

The lack of experience was obviously one reason for this, but there was another important reason in my opinion: I wonder what sources European writers referred to in their pieces of writings on Japan. It will be clear from Dr Miyata’s paper. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century the informants were mostly the Dutch merchants and Catholic missionaries from all over Europe. Most of these traders were in the service of the Dutch East Indian Company, and most of the missionaries were members of the order of the so-called Jesuit Society.

All in all, the Jesuits seemed to have much more influence than the Dutch merchants, since they transmitted an overall positive view of both countries, Japan as well as China, in their reports inherently to be circularized all over Europe. In both countries they were in very close contact with the leading gentry; in China with the educated class of the mandarins, and in Japan with the class of samurai, even the highest positions, namely daimyo. They called these political or military leaders “kings”. With a few exceptions, for example the custom of committing suicide in Japan, in particular the way of seppuku, which was contradictory to the Christian belief, the Jesuits reported to Europe that Japan was a well organized society based on a clear, rational and just system of values in terms of Neo-Confucian regulations and free practice of religion. This positive view of China and Japan influenced even Western philosophers of the French movement of Enlightenment, spreading positive attitudes towards Far Eastern Confucian thoughts among academic circles all over Europe.

Unfortunately, this attitude came to an end for two foremost reasons. One was the failure in the dissemination of Christianity in both countries, China as well as Japan. Certainly, as we historians know, it was not for religious but political reasons; the missionary work ended in failure hand in hand with the aggression and expansion of Western imperialism for gaining new markets and exercising geopolitical influence, which scared Japan as the one country, and indeed humiliated the large but powerless late Manchu-China as the other.

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The European perception of China and Japan changed. Japan was, as far as I rely on my personal research, in a better position. Since the information from Japan was scarce due to a strict seclusion policy, Japan seemed to remain as a country of fairy tales. The only window was the Dutch presence in Deshima, enriched by some reports based on the seamen’s writings from British or Russian ships, which passed by Japanese shores without staying in Japanese waters long. The less one knew about this country, the more it became attractive.

In case of China, the situation was different. Western countries had already been knocking at Chinese doors since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century distinctively, not only by means of their trading companies. China was by all means oppressed by Western interest in course of the so-called Opium Wars, which caused turmoil and violent unrest in the country. The outward positive impression of China faded away due to these internal political uncertainties and the dissatisfied population of that country.

As for this difference in the European perceptions of China and Japan, two examples are to be introduced, based on my recent research in which way the European attitudes were different.

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For the first comparative view of China and Japan, I introduce a young Austrian photographer who accompanied the Austro-Hungarian expedition to the Far East on the mission of concluding treaties, as it was called at that time, treaty of Friendship, Navigation and Commerce with Thailand, China and Japan. The young photographer was Michael Moser (1853–1912) who worked as the apprentice to the official photographer of this expedition.

When departing the Austrian harbour of Trieste (now belonging to Italy), this young man, who was born in a poor family in a remote and mountainous district of Austria, had nothing much information about the Far East. Thus, he, who had neither learned nor read much about China and Japan, definitely remained uninfluenced by prejudice and reported on these two countries in his diary and in his letters addressed to his parents in a quite ingenuous manner.

In June of 1869 (Meiji 2), the Austro-Hungarian expedition arrived in Hong-Kong, then already a British colony. Moser reported as follows (translation by the author):

*“The city is crowded with the Chinese. They work even a whole day on Sundays since they have no holidays. Everywhere one sees abacus. ... I didn’t feel well among the Chinese. I felt relieved when I left this crowded surrounding”.*

Two weeks later, the Austrian ships arrived in Shanghai. Our young chronicler reported:

*“The Chinese are very hardworking, they have much patience and endurance. Per annum they have only one holiday and work throughout the whole year. ... Money is the most important thing, almost their god. ... The Chinese quarters appear to be anthills in my eyes. Always terrible shouting, noise and roar. All streets were packed with people ... it smells terrible, almost suffocating.”*

On leaving Shanghai he summarized in the following way:

*“I wasn’t pleased to be here on land. First, I don’t like the Chinese in general. Second, it was awfully expensive, and third, the summer heat and the smell in the Chinese quarters were to the extreme.”*

Most probably, this young man of only 16 years of age might have felt forced to stay in China far too long; they had to stay there for about three months in fact. Thus, everything he experienced after arriving in Japan must have been a relief for him. The Austrian ship anchored in Nagasaki in September 4 in 1869 (Meiji 2).

What his diary tells us is as follows:

*“In the morning islands appeared, then land came into sight. At half past four we arrived in Nagasaki. Nagasaki is the most beautiful harbour I have ever seen. The surrounding looks like a lake. The entrance is so narrow that two ships could hardly pass each other. Green hills around reach the water. The small wooden buildings look nice. It must be a big city. The scenery here is beautiful and reminds me of my native land.”*

*“The people here have all, like the Chinese, black hairs, but no beard. They are of small stature and all very friendly.”*

That was his first impression of Japan. Over the next days he continued keeping his diary:

*“The Japanese writing system is the same as the Chinese, but the language the Japanese use pleased me much more. “Good morning” is “Ohayo”. ... The Japanese eat in principle similar food like the Chinese, foremost rice, which is, however, much purer and more appetizing than the Chinese one.”*

The young writer was quite detailed in writing down his impressions of Japan. He mentioned that the Japanese officials visited and controlled their ships. He did not use the terms such as samurai and yakunin, but called them officers of princes or daimyo, and referred to that the Austrian naval officers would have liked to see their swords, but it was rejected for the Japanese law forbade drawing a sword without any necessary reasons.

Further comparisons of life and circumstances in Japan with China were made:

*“In the Japanese city, there are many water canals with beautiful wooden bridges. Just in front of the town is the Dutch island Deshima. It is to be reached by a small bridge. ... Deshima is now a kind of a Dutch warehouse with a few stone-built two-storied magazines, which is only inhabited by Dutch and German traders.*

*Nagasaki is quite different from a Chinese city. All the streets are clean, no booth anywhere on the street. In Japan, there are even road sweepers who scavenge the streets. Everything here is much more tidy and neat. The streets are*

*cleaned everyday, and there is no smell at all. ... There are numbers of beautiful shops with wonderful products of the country ... One can enter these stores uninhibited and look around freely without being approached or addressed by the owner. Sometimes you enter such a shop in which all the items are displayed openly without any person present. This is undoubtedly a sign that the Japanese are honest people.*" (all citations are from the handwritten diaries of Michael Moser, which have not been published yet).

Further citations from the writings of this young photographer might not be necessary. The citations above seem to be enough to inform us of the fact that – at least in this case – Japan attracted European travellers more than the neighbour China in many ways.

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As to his age and education – young and with only six years primary school education – Michael Moser surely belonged to the so-called average people from the West. The question remains – is his view representative among Western observers or not?

In this part, another person, who comes from a completely different level of society, will be taken into consideration. In some way, he cannot be compared to the young photographer because of the difference in their respective social backgrounds – a man from the nobility. Nevertheless this person shared a lot of similarities with Michael Moser; coming from the same country, Austria, and visiting China and Japan. In addition, he also wrote a book on his experience and did form a clear judgement on the countries he visited.

This man's name is Alexander Baron Hübner (1811-1892), a renowned diplomat in the Austrian Foreign Service. He represented his country for ten years in Paris (1849-1859), was appointed as Minister of Security in the government from 1865 to 1869. Thereafter, he took up the post of ambassador in Rome. After his retirement, he carried out what conventionally only young sons of wealthy families did, going on a grand tour. For example, Goethe did it when travelling to Italy. Hübner employed the new means for going overseas, the new invention of steamships secured safe and far voyages. He went to China and Japan via America. From the very beginning, he made clear what he wanted to do, as written in his introduction: Visiting China, "*the Celestial Empire, the silent, constant, and generally passive –but always obstinate– resistance which the spirit of the Chinese opposes to the moral, political, and commercial invasions of Europe*". Then learning from the "*Empire of the Rising Sun*" (Nihon) more about "*the efforts of certain remarkable men to launch their country abruptly in the path of progress*".

Hübner, who was an extramarital son of chancellor Metternich, wrote these recollections about his stay in the Far East between August and December in 1871, originally in French (*Promenade autour du monde*, Paris 1873). Soon afterwards he edited his extensive analysis in German (*Ein Spaziergang um die Welt*, 1873). An English (*A Ramble Round the World in 1871*, London 1874, New York 1875) and a Czech translation (*Procházka kolem světa*, Praha 1880) were also published. All of them were issued in many versions, for example as a 'popular edition' ("Wohlfeile Ausgabe") or as a quite luxurious edition with many illustrations, some of which were sketched by Hübner himself:

*"There is no great town in Asia, and very few even in Europe, which, on the score of cleanliness can be compared to Yedo. [...] What no pen or pencil can ever truly render is the sight of the streets, with their busy, picturesque crowd of men and women smiling courteously at one another, and bowing profoundly to each other. [...] It gives the appearance of an excess of politeness and deference. Whilst you are walking down a street, of which the extreme cleanliness is the first thing that strikes you, and looking right and left, only regretting that you have not a hundred eyes wherewith to take in all this enchanting scenes [...]."*

Such expressions about Japan are not to be found in the description of his walk through the Chinese municipalities: "*One must, however, declare, to the honour of the people of Shanghai, and in the interest of truth, that the greater part of the travellers whose books I have read exaggerate a little the horrors with which their descriptions are filled.*" Then a sort of his honest remarks follows: "*Certainly there are corners, public places, and bye-streets here, when*

*one had better shut one's eyes and stop up one's nose.*" In this sense, Hübner is in complete agreement with the young photographer's remarks. And he is even the more to be trusted since as a professional diplomat he was not out and about on his first journey.

One difference needs to be highlighted as a matter of course - the young Moser kept his diary only for himself or his personal enjoyment without much ado. From the very beginning, Hübner wrote his book for the purpose of publishing it to a broad readership. Whereas he was outspoken and trenchant in describing social and political details in respect to China and Japan, he used subtle and elaborate wordings.

Hübner had ample experience of traveling and living abroad. Due to his obligation as a member of the Foreign Service of his government he stayed in the capitals of France and Italy around a dozen years. He toured in Europe here and there, and became familiar with many other European countries and regions, which were not always glittering and wealthy dwelling places; he did not take his eyes off the poverty also occurring in Europe.

As for their ordinary life, Hübner and Moser shared similarities in a great degree. Both had a very traditional, even conservative background in respect to their values. Though one was an inexperienced young country boy, making a career with courage in his new surroundings. The other was a highly intellectual man with access to the world of politics and diplomacy. Luckily, Moser had during his service in Japan for seven years two times a personal glimpse at Meiji Tenno, though from the second row within a group of Japanese dignitaries. On the contrary, Baron Hübner –quite privileged– was invited to a special and personal audience in the Imperial palace by the Japanese emperor.

Thus, in terms of judging high politics in China and Japan, Hübner had enough cutting-edge knowledge to make his diary a treasury that enables its readership to gain insight into the interior circumstances as well as diplomatic relations of these two Far Eastern powers. To a certain extent, China followed the same course of development within the world politics as Hübner critically conjectured. He surmised, certainly from a very European view that China still had to surmount much more difficulties than Japan that had already shown the great potential of modernizing their country by leaps and bounds.

Hübner's diary ends with the conclusion: *"To persuade the Chinese to accept our civilization, we must act on their hearts more than on their minds, which are far more open than people generally think. We must know how to influence their wills. The Chinese are not like the Japanese – those charming children, governed by 'enfants terribles'. They will adopt our civilization when they begin to understand it; but they will not understand it till the day arrives when they choose to do so."*

The *"enfants terribles"* as he called them, among others, Iwakura Tomomi, Sawa Nobuyoshi or Kido Takayoshi (*"I have not met any face so clever or intelligent in this country [...] . The summing-up of his [Kido's] conversation was unlimited confidence in the work of reform"*), are described quite elaborately and affectionately.

These are both valuable sources for historical research. The diary of Alexander von Hübner is widely available (in English as a reprint), and the diary of Michael Moser will be published soon.

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