

**HOW JOURNALISTS' BIAS CAN DISTORT THE TRUTH:
A CASE STUDY OF JAPAN'S MILITARY SEIZURE
OF KOREA IN 1904–1905**

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Today we live in a society that champions freedom of the press. A vibrant press is a key ingredient for a successful democracy, but writers and publications must separate hard news from news analysis and editorials. Unbalanced reporting or deliberate misrepresentation of the facts represents the antithesis of responsible journalism. Problems arise when several journalists covering the same event allow their own biases to influence their coverage. This phenomenon may be labeled the “Rashomon effect,” where there are varying interpretations of what is going on that it becomes difficult for the reader to know the whole truth. I examine this issue through a case study of how six Americans and one Canadian journalist covered the Japanese seizure of Korea in 1904 and 1905 during the Russo-Japanese War.

Rashomon, a 1950 Japanese film directed by Akira Kurosawa (1910–1988), is often cited as one of the finest films that investigates the philosophy of justice. On the surface, it is a crime thriller, but the narrative goes much deeper. The viewer is asked to confront multiple personal perceptions of reality in a vain attempt to get the final truth. Kurosawa asks viewers whether it is ever possible to look at certain circumstances and to arrive at a definite conclusion. Can we, as humans, ever really agree with absolute certainty about anything? Are we able to be objective about anything, or are we forced away because our subjectivity gets in the way?

The *Rashomon* storyline is very straightforward. A medieval samurai and his bride are journeying through a thick forest on their way to Kyoto when they are apprehended by the notorious bandit Tajimaru, who kills the husband and rapes the wife. Tajimaru is quickly arrested and questioned at a police station. The testimony that he gives is substantially distorted from that of the wife. A psychic is brought in to hear the testimony of the murdered husband, which is also inconsistent with that of his wife and

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killer. A woodsman witness later reveals another interpretation of the story. The viewer is left in a quandary – what really happened? The audience will beg Kurosawa to provide some resolution, but he leaves them hanging. An even bigger question is – what is truth?

Western news coverage of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) presents us with the same problem. If reading the newspaper during the time of the war, one might be confused as to the efficacy of Japan’s seizure of Korea. The articles, written by seven American and Canadian journalists, provided seven different viewpoints, respectively: George Kennan (1845–1924), Frederick Palmer (1873–1958), William Elliott Griffis (1843–1928), William Jennings Bryan (1860–1925), Frederick McKenzie (1868–1931), Thomas Millard (1868–1942), and Jack London (1876–1916). What was Japan pursuing? Was its move into Korea an act of “brotherly love and respect,” or was it an act of pure unadulterated imperialism? President Theodore Roosevelt read their work and likely based US foreign policy on information and perspectives provided by some of these writers.

The basic facts are clear. Japan and Russia went to war in 1904 to determine which power would control Korea. Japan saw any foreign power taking Korea as a mortal threat to its national security. Japan’s military chief, Yamagata Aritomo, explained that the purpose of the war was to secure Korea as a bulwark of Japan’s national security and to remove Russia as a threat to Korea. This was Japan’s chance to build a strong sphere of influence on the Asian mainland.² One of Russia’s main goals was to control one or more warm water ports in Korea and to dominate the country both politically and economically.

When Japan declared war on Russia in February 1904, it forced the Korean government to sign an agreement allowing Japan to station troops in their nation. Most of these troops then marched up from Seoul through North Korea to confront Russian forces in Manchuria. By mid-1905, the Japanese government had forced the Korean government to agree to a Japanese takeover of the Korean state and a termination of all relations with other

² Yamagata told American journalist Frederick Palmer at the start of the war that “If you look at the geographical position of Korea you will see that it is like a poniard pointing at the heart of Japan...If Korea is occupied by a foreign power, the Japan Sea ceases to be Japanese and the Korean Straits are no longer in our control.” Quoted in Frederick Palmer, *With Kuroki in Manchuria* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1904), 17.

nations. In effect, Japan had turned Korea into a fully occupied protectorate by the end of 1905 and a colony by 1910.

While Japan's 1904 move into Korea was principally for national security, its propaganda machine declared that its war aim was the creation of a truly independent nation. Korea, the Japanese declared, was hopelessly backward, corrupt, and weak. This inherent weakness exposed it to a takeover by a foreign power. Russia, eyeing Korea's strategic position and its warm water ports as well as the backward and corrupt nature of its society, was poised to invade the Korean Peninsula. Japan saw it as its duty to protect its neighbor by helping Korea gain its independence by driving out the Russians and modernizing their society to create a new and more efficient government while introducing modern technology and administrative reforms to the beleaguered land. As a result, Japan would play the role of big brother to its closest Asian neighbor.

Most Western reporters agreed that Korea was a corrupt and backward land and that Japan, in contrast, was a modern and efficiently run state. Where they decidedly disagreed was the nature of Japan's incursion into Korea. Several of these journalists lauded Japan for its unselfish devotion to the protection and modernization of Korea. It urged President Roosevelt and the United States to support the Japanese subjugation of Korea actively. Others were more contrarian, denouncing Japan's pledge to fight for Korean independence and accusing Japan's takeover of its neighbor as a wanton act of aggressive imperialism that the US should renounce in no uncertain terms.

Veteran war correspondent George Kennan was a major supporter of Japan's seizure of Korea. He wrote:

The first thing that strikes a traveler in going from Japan to Korea is the extraordinary contrast between the cleanliness, good order, industry, and general prosperity of one country, and the filthiness, demoralization, laziness and general rack and ruin of the other...The Japanese are clean, enterprising, intelligent, brave, well-educated and strenuously industrious whilst the Koreans strike a newcomer as dirty in person and habits, apathetic, slow-witted, lacking in spirit, densely ignorant, and constitutionally lazy...Korea is an organism that has become so diseased as to lose its power of growth; and it

can be restored to a normal condition only by a long course of remedial treatment.³

Kennan accepted Japan's announced goal of entering Korea to improve the welfare and independence of Koreans. He applauded Japan's unselfish, noble, and brotherly act to "uplift and regenerate" its most unfortunate neighbor. This bold experiment of one state to voluntarily modernize its disadvantaged neighbor was a measure of true benevolence.

Frederick Palmer, like Kennan, was already a celebrated war correspondent and friend and informal adviser to President Roosevelt at the time of the Russo-Japanese War. Resembling Kennan, Palmer's work suffered from a lack of balance. He was mesmerized by the Japanese – they could do no wrong and were wonderfully clean and modern people. They represented the "cusp" of Western Anglo-Saxon civilization in Asia and were using their highly modern military to benefit the Koreans. Palmer believed that the Koreans were a pitiful, almost uncivilized people who could only be saved by a bold Japanese occupation that would and could by sheer force bring them into the modern world.⁴

Palmer sees the coming of the Japanese to Korea as an act of benevolence. The Koreans, he feels, are sick and helpless drowning in their own corruption, filth, and poverty. What they needed most was the helping hand of an obliging big brother who will rescue them from their oppression: "We are passing through a Korea that has been keenly and subtly made Japanese in two months – a country conquered by kindness, fair treatment... Now the Japanese army is marching across Korea spreading modern civilization like a crashing wave."⁵

Roosevelt regarded both Kennan and Palmer as informal advisors, and it is evident that the President actively sought them out for information and advice when it came to questions concerning Japan's involvement in Korean affairs. Furthermore, Roosevelt wrote encouraging notes to Kennan after reading his articles on Korea as a "degenerate" nation, and when Palmer visited Washington in early 1905 while taking a break from war coverage,

³ George Kennan, "Korea: A Degenerate State" *The Outlook*, October 7, 1905, 307.

⁴ Palmer, *op. cit.*, 35.

⁵ Frederick Palmer, "All Ready for Action in Northern Korea," *Collier's*, April 30, 1904, 13.

Roosevelt invited him several times to the White House to elicit his views on Korean affairs.⁶ It is worthy of note that Roosevelt's later policy statements on Korea reflect the thinking of both Palmer and Kennan very closely.

Two other reporters, William Elliot Griffis and William Jennings Bryan, admired Japan's modernization process and assumed that Korea was a backward state when compared with Japan. Griffis, a highly dedicated Japanophile, had spent several years in Japan in the early 1870s as a teacher and was known for writing the first comprehensive history of Japan in English, *The Mikados Empire*. Bryan was a major political figure for the US (three times the Democratic Party's nominee for President and later Secretary of State in the Wilson administration). In 1905, Bryan and his family did a "world tour" in both Korea and Japan for up to a month. Griffis wrote articles for news magazine *The Outlook* while Bryan contributed numerous articles to his own widely read publication, *The Commoner*.

Griffis and Bryan agreed that Korea could benefit from Japanese intervention, but also reported that the Koreans did not appreciate the Japanese depriving them of their freedom and sovereignty. Japan, they reported, was ready to impart the best of their civilization on Korea, but Koreans were not content with the presence of thousands of Japanese troops in their country. They said that the Japanese would fail in their stated mission if they first did not win the friendship and confidence of the Korean people and that Japan's moves there were far too imperialistic for their liking. These reports significantly vary from what Kennan and Palmer reported as to the Korean reaction to Japanese activities in their country.

Frederick McKenzie, a Canadian working as a reporter for a British newspaper, painted a distinct picture of the Japanese incursion into Korea, where he directly counters the writing of Kennan and Palmer. McKenzie argues convincingly that the Japanese probably intended from the start of their modernization efforts in the 1870s to exert their authority over Korea. Japan's goal by the 1890s was to become the leader of a revived Asia, and according to McKenzie: "She is advancing today along three lines – territorial expansion, increased fighting power, and an aggressive commercial campaign."⁷

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Frederick McKenzie, *The Unveiled East* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), 19. This book consists of articles that McKenzie wrote during and immediately after the Russo-Japanese War.

Korea was to be the heart of its growing empire in northeast Asia. The Japanese told the world that their goal was the benevolent modernization of Korea – that Japan would invest in the people and resources to create a secure and truly independent nation. This country was to become a showplace of Japan’s modernization program. The reality, according to McKenzie, was contradictory: Japan was prepared to use crude aggressive force to seize full control over Korea and to employ whatever brutality was necessary to subdue the Koreans. In short, the Japanese military and police sought to bulldoze it into total submission employing sheer terrorism, which included beating and murdering their innocent civilians, torturing many others, and physically harming and humiliating the women. In other words, McKenzie felt that the Japanese had descended to the lowest depths of barbarism to get their way. He wondered why the British entered an alliance with such people, one which he determined the Japanese would inevitably break.

Thomas F. Millard, the top journalist for the *New York Herald* covering the Russo-Japanese War and later a reporter for the *New York Times* covering East Asia, was a determined anti-imperialist who strenuously opposed British and Japanese rule. This stance caused Millard to write extensively that Japan’s seizure of Korea was a blatant case of extending their rule over another country. He held a highly pragmatic and objective view of Japan’s growing influence in East Asian affairs after 1900 and was appalled that Japan had opted to become an imperialist in Asia akin to its American and British “allies” in East and Southeast Asia.

Millard, always the anti-imperialist, reminds his readers that neither Russia nor Japan had any proprietary rights in either Korea or Manchuria. Korea was already a long-standing independent kingdom, and Manchuria had been an integral part of China for several centuries. The great truth was that both Japan and Russia were fighting to dominate land that belonged to neither:

Much has been written about the causes of this late war, so much so that there is now danger that the real causes will be entirely lost sight of in a chaos of comment and advocacy. We heard much of the rights of Japan on one hand, and the rights of Russia on the other. As a matter of fact, neither belligerent had any rights involved. Both had interests, but no rights. This constitutes a difference as well as a distinction. The chief bones of contention were Korea and Manchuria, and neither Japan nor Russia had any more

rights in these countries than the United States, France, or Germany. Manchuria is part of China and Korea is, or was when the war began, an independent kingdom. Any rights foreign nations have been under treaties which may be modified or reinstated at any time. This distinction should be kept clear, for it is vital in any intelligent discussion of the issues of the war and their settlement.⁸

Millard states that before the war, unscrupulous British and American journalists had fed Americans reams of false pro-Japanese propaganda. The truth was that when the war began, Japan staged a successful coup in Korea. It took control of several Korean government ministries and now ultimately ruled the nation: on paper, they looked intact, but the reality was quite different. Millard notes that “[t]here exists in the heart of every Korean a deep and bitter hatred of Japan and everything Japanese.”⁹ Japanese soldiers were everywhere, but outwardly the Korean government still functioned. Nevertheless, every Korean knew that their country was doomed.

The most objective correspondent in Korea was Jack London, then one of the most popular fiction writers in the US. As a journalist, he was known for being a feature writer for newspapers or weekly news magazines. His long, well-developed essays in the Hearst chain of newspapers reflected his points of view. However, unlike war correspondents Kennan and Palmer, London's more balanced writing did not seek to promote the agenda of one nation over another. In the era of “yellow journalism,” when few reporters wrote objectively or sought true balance in their coverage, London kept a fully independent voice even when a more pro-Japanese stance may have won him more favor with the Japanese. His own obstinacy made him a pain in the backsides of the Japanese, who eventually forced London to return to the US but permitted him to offer American readers fine penetrating coverage of the early stages of the war.

London, in his writing, is neither pro-Korean nor pro-Japanese. He has personal gripes about the Japanese high command, but he admires the

⁸ Thomas Franklin Millard, *The New Far East: An Examination into the New Position of Japan and Her Influence upon the Solution of the Far East Question* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

meticulous organization and good order of the Japanese army. London also depicts the plight of the frightened Korean peasant and pities the misery of captured Russian soldiers. In short, he writes objectively about the war going on before him without bias for one side or another. Overall, London does realize that the days of Western dominance in Asia are almost over and that China and Japan would become major world powers later in the twentieth century.

As an ethnologist at heart, London investigates the dynamics of East Asian societies. A close examination of his writing shows that he was neither an alarmist nor a bigot, as some writers claimed. His Russo-Japanese war dispatches offer balanced writing, evincing concern for the welfare of both Japanese and Russian soldiers and the Korean peasants, as well as respect for the ordinary Chinese whom he met. As a widely read journalist covering the war, London emerges as one of the era's few writers who sensed that the tide of white "superiority" and Western expansionism was receding.

Furthermore, London was especially sensitive to the plight of the Korean peasant. Through his writing as well as his photography, he captured the poverty of the land and the misery of its people. He reaches the conclusion that the cause of their misery was their exploitation by the dominant aristocratic *yangban* class, which did little or nothing to advance their nation. The common man in Korea led a miserable and exploited life suffering at the cruel and corrupt whims of the aristocracy. While the *yangban* lived in comparative luxury, the common Korean lived in filthy and impoverished homes in both towns and villages. The Korean government forced the commoners to pay heavy taxes but spent virtually no money for the edification and education of the people.

It was portrayals such as these that dominated London's writing and gave readers an inside view of Korean life behind the scenes. He was alone among these writers in that he never really discussed the possibility of the Japanese seizure of Korea. His comprehensive coverage of its conditions was both critical and sympathetic, yet his photographs, which numbered over a thousand, pictured a country that was poor, where the faces of the people were worried and glum, and where the land was barren.

London's writing on Korea follows along the lines of his 1903 book, *The People of the Abyss*, where he describes the great poverty and misery of the British living in London's infamous East End. London's attitudes towards the East Enders is a mixture of pity and disdain – he is distressed by their miserable poverty but is also disgusted with the way they lived their lives. London's views on the common Korean are quite similar. His widely

published articles photographs show desperate Korean refugees, dressed in white, suffering from the devastating effects of the war and the Japanese military occupation of their land. One is especially impressed by a very poignant photograph of a young girl, perhaps only six or seven, carrying her younger sister on her back with a terribly worried look on her face. Leading scholar Jeanne Campbell Reesman writes:

London's photographs from Korea signal his developing photographic goals and his compassionate view of humanity. His socialist views on labor and class are illustrated in his many images of people at work, and the images of war orphans [in Korea] echo the suffering of the children he observed in London's East End. His photographs [of Koreans] preserve the dignity of even the most destitute of subjects, such as refugees.¹⁰



**Figure 1. Young Korean Refugee carrying her sister.
Jack London, 1904**

¹⁰ Jeanne Campbell Reesman and Sara S. Hodson, *Jack London: Photographer* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2010), 65.

In conclusion, we come back to the main thesis of this study featuring the Rashomon effect: *Caveat Lector! Let the Reader Beware!* When we read history, we must carefully examine not only what the writer is saying, but also his or her perspectives and biases. History does not provide absolute answers. As it happened in World War II, we know for a fact that Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and that Japan earlier initiated a war with Russia with a surprise attack on Port Arthur, but as historians, we must decide for ourselves *why* a certain event occurred. Let the reader derive his or her own perspectives on history.