

Briefing Memo

Ryotaro Shiba's *Clouds above the Hill (Saka no ue no Kumo)* and the Russo-Japanese War: From a Researcher's Perspective

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Introduction

Ryotaro Shiba's long novel *Clouds above the Hill (Saka no ue no Kumo)* was serialized in *Sankei Shimbun* from April 22, 1968 to August 4, 1972, and since then there have been various arguments about the novel until the present day. For example, *Saka no ue no Kumo* Museum in Matsuyama, Ehime Prefecture carries out its activities as a base for the concept of using the town, which is one of the settings in the novel, as a field museum. And *Clouds above the Hill* will be broadcast on NHK as a long-running drama starting on November 29, 2009.

In Japan, historical novels rarely attract history researchers, but *Clouds above the Hill* could be an exception to this. For instance, Ryuichi Narita of Japan Women's University has extensively read through all of Shiba's works including *Clouds above the Hill*, and clearly articulates Shiba as a "post-WWII thinker" who, even when portraying leaders' characters in the public sphere, would intersperse their images with depictions in the private sphere where they fraternized with people. One thinks that this is probably part of the reason why Shiba's works are so popular. To those of us in modern Japan, analysis of the content of *Clouds above the Hill* with views of scholars and knowledgeable persons provides assistance in looking back over the Japan of the Meiji Period (1868-1912). So this short paper will consider carefully part of the content of *Clouds above the Hill* by focusing on the Russo-Japanese War with superior arguments.

Course Leading Up to the Outbreak of War

Clouds above the Hill tells about the course leading up to the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War of February 1904 in Chapter 1, "Towards War". It says that Russia was deliberately hounding Japan to its death, and Japan had no choice but to strike Russia. What sort of indications does academia make in comparison with this view of Shiba?

Yukio Ito of Kyoto University has pointed out that a correct reading of Boris A. Romanov's *Russia in Manchuria, 1892-1906*, reveals a different description compared with traditional arguing. Romanov's work has traditionally been recognized as arguing that in the period before Russia fought with Japan, Russia had been moving its military forces south. But Ito argues that Romanov told that Russia had not been consistently moving southward. In fact, although Russia had troops stationed in Manchuria since the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, Ito claims that, "To recover the vast amount of capital

required to build the Trans-Siberian Railway, Russia was focused on the safety of this railway, particularly in the Manchurian region. But it was suffering from the fact that the costs of stationing troops there were piling up, and Russia was wavering over how far to extend its sphere of influence and under what sorts of conditions to withdraw its troops.” Isao Chiba of Showa Women’s University has also pointed out that, based on a telegram sent by Nikolai II, Tsar of Russia to Alekseev, Viceroy at the end of January 1904, Russia’s intention was to stop at deploying military forces to Manchuria. He also points out that it is thoroughly possible that Japan got Russia to approve of Japan’s military use within the Korean territory.

But this telegram from Tsar Nicolai II was not sent to Rosen, the Russian Minister in Tokyo. Then Japan, recognizing that there was no room for negotiations with Russia, decided to initiate war. Scholars’ arguing about this course leading up to the outbreak of war is that there was a contrast in that Russia assumed that Japan most likely did not have the will to fight and underestimated Japan, while Japan undertook preparations for war early on in order to gain the upper hand in the war.

Assessment of General Nogi Maresuke

With regard to the siege of Port Arthur, that produced large numbers of casualties during the Russo-Japanese War, in the chapter “Siege of Port Arthur”, Shiba said that the Japanese army was being led to its death by “mass suicide” due to incompetence on the part of General Nogi. Shiba attributed the cause of this to a “lack of tactical capabilities by General Nogi” in a scathing criticism.

Tsuneari Fukuda, the literary critic leveled harsh criticism against this depiction by Shiba and refuted it. Fukuda made the following assertions: The General Headquarters and Headquarters, Japanese armies in Manchuria also failed to comprehend the situation at Port Arthur, which was heavily fortified, and so they deserve to be blamed first and foremost. In addition, it was regrettable that Maj. Gen. Iyozo Tamura had already died, as there were very few people within the Imperial Japanese military who had insight into how to capture such fortifications. Shiba said that if the Third Japanese Army had captured 203-Meter Hill from the outset it would not have turned into such a devastating battle, but he did not give adequate consideration to the topography of Port Arthur. The consecutive attacks by the Third Japanese Army tremendously weakened the Russian side in Port Arthur. Shiba let loose his criticism of Nogi based on the evidence from the depiction in Lieut. Gen. Hisao Tani’s *The Russo-Japanese War History Series to be Considered Confidential (Kimitsu-Nichirosenshi)*, but even Tani himself has acknowledged that his investigation into this depiction was not enough. There is much that historical researchers can learn from the above dissertation on Shiba’s criticisms by Fukuda.

Western military history researchers like John W. Steinberg and Bruce W. Menning have also

pointed out the similarities between the siege of Port Arthur, in which heavy fortifications, machine guns, automatic weapons, and rapid-fire guns were introduced, with the Battle of Verdun (1916) during World War I. They refrain from making a negative assessment of the tactics adopted by Nogi.

Devising the “Crossing the T” Tactic in the Battle of Tsushima

According to the chapter titled “Jyushichi-ya,” while Saneyuki Akiyama was staying at a hospital around 1901, then Lieutenant Naganari Ogasawara of the Japanese Navy lent him a book on military strategy called *The Tactics that the Noshima Murakami Pirates Used (Noshimaryu-Kaizoku-kohou)*. Shiba claims that Akiyama devised his tactics for the Battle of Tsushima based on a hint taken from the “formation in long single file (*chodanojin*)” tactic described in the above book.

Yet in this same chapter Shiba makes the following indication. Namely, “At the time, it was believed that there were only two people in the Japanese Navy who deserved to be called strategists; Comdr. Hayao Shimamura and Lieut. Comdr. Tanin Yamaya, who were Saneyuki’s superiors... When it came to writings by the Japanese on naval strategy, there was only a single volume written by Yamaya then.” Shiba could not help but allude to Yamaya.

Yamaya was under then Vice Admiral Togo Heihachiro, President of the Naval War College, for three years beginning in 1896 (except for a brief time) in his capacity as both a student and an instructor at the school. In later years, Admiral Yamanashi Katsunoshin reflected that it was Yamaya who was the first person to invent this “crossing the T” tactic. At the Naval War College in the period prior to the Russo-Japanese War, it can logically be seen that Yamaya edified Togo who had a zeal for tactical studies and education on military history.

The tactic designed by Yamaya was named “*en-senjyutsu*” instead of the “crossing the T” tactic. It consisted of a single file formation which maintained a distance between battleships of two tenth nautical miles (approximately 370 meters). What is noteworthy about this is that Yamaya’s idea also influenced Akiyama to no small degree. Akiyama, who served as an instructor at the Naval War College as Yamaya’s successor, conveyed his friendly intention to disseminate the “*en-senjyutsu*” to the Navy brass in a letter to Yamaya in the summer of 1902. Later on, during the Battle of Tsushima, Yamaya served as the commander of the Japanese battleship *Kasagi*.

Japan’s Path after the Russo-Japanese War

Shiba penned the “Afterward” to the second volume (library edition) of *Clouds above the Hill* in October 1969, in which he describes Japan after the Russo-Japanese War as follows. “After the Russo-Japanese War the Japanese people had gradually lost their sanity and the nation plunged into the mania of the Showa period (beginning in 1926). Ultimately the nation and its people had

whipped themselves into frenzy and engaged in the Pacific War, and they were defeated.” Let us now examine these words by Shiba.

The late Seizaburo Sato of University of Tokyo has pointed out that the later it was from the end of the Russo-Japanese War to around 1930, the closer Japan’s political system was nearing liberal democracy in the wake of industrialization and urbanization. Compared with this trend, it looked like different that the Imperial Reservist’s Association and the rural economic reform campaign developed, but these were manifestations of the leadership’s sense of impending crisis regarding the weakening and dismantling of the family structure and agricultural communities. And it looked like “the mania” that army staff officers initiated in the 1920s was to create a structure of all-out warfare, but as Minoru Kawada of Nagoya University has made clear, the perspective is that these were brought about by the concerns of Maj. Gen. Tetsuzan Nagata and others who were shocked by European devastation from World War I.

What is more, with regard to the international environment surrounding Japan in the 1930s in the lead up to the outbreak of the Pacific War, Sato pointed out that the cooperation among the major countries in the East Asian region in attempting to maintain order in the region was almost entirely lacking. Sato also listed three threats to Japan during this period. These were the Great Depression, challenges from China which was trying to achieve the annulment of unequal treaties and the complete recovery of its rights, and the Soviet Union whose armed forces had been building up rapidly. Compared to the 1930s, one finds Japan to have been in a far more advantageous international environment during the period when Japan had the backing of the Japan-UK Alliance and was capable of engaging in a war against Russia.

Sato also pointed to three background factors that led Japan, which was already in a state of war with China, to also initiate a war against the United States. These were the rise of Nazi Germany, the enactment of the Tripartite Pact, and the generation of a vacuum in East Asia following the eruption of World War II in Europe. If the above points are taken into consideration, then it has to be said that the assertion by Shiba, who stated that “the nation and its people had whipped themselves into frenzy leading up to engagement in the Pacific War”, is too simplistic.

Conclusion

When a historical perspective such as the one incorporated into *Clouds above the Hill* by Shiba is compared to some superior arguments, as has been pointed out by Isao Chiba, one can see “significant problems in terms of historical judgments via economic rationalism or simplifications.” This is particularly apparent with Shiba’s assessments of Nogi and the pre-Pacific War Period.

Regarding these limitations of Shiba's, one can also gain hints at still another facet from the indications of Hiroshi Wada, who has long served as the editor in charge of Shiba at Bungeishunju Ltd. Shiba would sometimes take "behavior that veered from the facts," such as unhesitatingly using rumor and hearsay in depictions of characters. This point can also be affirmed from Shiba's statements related to devising the "crossing the T" tactic from the Battle of Tsushima. The reader must exercise caution.

Though one has repeatedly criticized Shiba thus far, one wouldn't like to assert that the novel should be brushed aside as a means of conveying history to future generations. Because novels sometimes tell us realistic understanding of certain dimensions of the era through depictions like the conversations of characters. Takashi Nagatsuka's *The Soil: A Portrait of Rural Life in Meiji Japan* and Riichi Yokomitsu's *Shanghai* are examples of novels from which historical researchers can learn a great deal.

The significance of historical research peeps out from *Clouds above the Hill* with views of scholars and knowledgeable persons. Historical research is like an endeavor that strives to open up new horizons by repeatedly questioning and revising facts. Doing so allows us to anchor our view of society and worldview on the basis of facts, thereby expanding and deepening such views further.

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