

# GPJ

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ON JAPAN**

**A Yearly Academic Journal**

**Nº 2**

**Japan's Interaction with  
the Turkish and the  
Muslim World**

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# **Shoes and Modern Civilization Between Racism and Imperialism: The 1880 Yoshida Masaharu Mission of Meiji Japan to Qajar Iran as Global History**

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the nineteenth century Meiji Japanese self-reflection on modernity, civilization and identity that was compelled to negotiate between Racism and Imperialism. The Meiji vision of a global world was made up of a hierarchy of nations according to their level of enlightenment and civilization using the West as a benchmark. The study of Yoshida Masaharu's travel account *Kaikyō Tanken Perusha no Tabi* (The Expedition to the Islamic World: The Journey to Persia) (Tokyo: Hakubunka, 1894) shows this attitude. Yoshida's book is also quite valuable as the first-hand account of the Japanese interaction in 1880 with Persia of the Qajar dynasty in Iran as an entry into the Muslim world. Sent by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Japanese Mission was a small-scale version of the famous Iwakura Mission to learn about the West earlier between 1871-1873, as an investigation expedition to study the Muslim Middle East-Islamic affairs. The Japanese Mission of seven members including an Army officer representing the newly established *Sanbō Honbu*, the Japanese General Staff, and five businessmen, were headed by the envoy Yoshida Masaharu, a liberal Constitutionalist from Tosa domain whose views colored his interpretation of Qajar Iran and Shah Nasir al-Din's reforms using Western know-how. The Yoshida Mission's experience shows us some of the enduring perceptions as well as stereotyped images among the general Japanese public even today classifying Islam as an alien religion and the Middle Eastern world as a strange geography: exotic but alien, fascinating but also unfamiliar.

This paper argues that the Yoshida travelogue actually reveals to us the complex cultural and political layers with which Yoshida saw Qajar Iran and provides an instructive journey into the mind of a nineteenth century Meiji Japanese elite who still carried their Edo cultural background as well as the more obvious Westernism of the new regime in order to decipher the global context of Iran. In turn, the Yoshida Mission's impact on Iranian intellectuals and their subsequent 1906 Constitutional Revolution shows the global influences and connections between the history of two so-called Non-Western worlds in the process of adapting Western forms and ideas in their respective reformist agendas.

**Keywords:** Yoshida Masaharu, Qajar Iran, travelogue, Sanbō Honbu, Shah Nasir al-Din, westernization

### **Introduction**

On September 27, 1880, a minor debacle occurred between the envoy of the Japanese Empire, Yoshida Masaharu (1852-1921) who led the first official Mission of the Meiji government to the Muslim polities of the Western hemisphere and the Persian Chief of Protocol of the Qajar dynasty of Iran. Before the Japanese Mission could make an entrance into the great hall of the Iranian Palace to have an audience with Shah Nasir al-Din (1831-1896), the Qajar ruler and "Pivot of the World" as he was known to his subjects, the Persian chief of Protocol had politely instructed the Mission about etiquette. He first whispered to the ear of the interpreter who subsequently descended the stairs to whisper again to the ear of Iran's Foreign Minister to tell Yoshida and the other Japanese that they need to take off their shoes before entering the royal audience. Yoshida stood below the stairs leading up to the audience hall, next to Mirza Aga Ibrahim Khan, the new Foreign Minister of the Iranian monarchy, stubbornly insisting that he would not take off his shoes, even though this was the customary etiquette in the Persian court for anyone including foreign diplomats who were to enter into royal audience. Yoshida reminds us of Great Britain's Lord George Macartney (1735-1806) who had defied the Chinese court in 1793 more than a century ago by refusing to adhere to the age-old ritual of nine pros-



trations acknowledging the supreme status of the Son of Heaven above all other sovereigns, the Qing Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799) in audience. In the name of “Western equality to China” Lord Macartney had insisted on paying his respect to the Chinese Emperor only according to the Western norms, meaning the customary British courtly ritual of kneeling on one knee in front of a monarch.<sup>1</sup> Just as Lord Macartney had defied the Chinese court of a century ago by refusing to kowtow to the Qing Emperor in the audience, in a small-scale and probably quite more ironic manner, Yoshida caused a minor protocol problem. In defying the “whisper message” that Yoshida should take off his shoes before entering the audience hall, Yoshida was the epitome of the Europeanization claim of Meiji Japan in the public sphere.<sup>2</sup>

1 James Louis Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 105-106.

2 For the Yoshida Mission treated in this article, see the following sources. Yoshida Masaharu, *Kaikyō Tanken Perusha no Tabi* (The expedition to the Islamic World the Journey to Persia) (Tokyo: Hakubunka, 1894), p. 141 for shoes crisis (Here after *Perusha*). The recent Persian translation of expedition account is Hashem Rajabzadeh and I. Niiya, *Safar-nameh-ye Yushida Masaharu: Nokhostin Ferestadeh-ye zhaḥon be Iran-e Dowreh-ye Qajar, 1297-98 Hejri Qamari* (Tehran: Moasseseh-ye Chap va Entesharat-e Astan-e Qods Razavi, 1994).

Sugita Hideaki, *Nihonjin no chūtō Hakken gyakuen kinhō no naka no hikaku bunka shi* (The Japanese discovery of the Middle East reciprocal comparative cultural history) Tokyo: the University of Tokyo Press, 1995) pp. 135-144 for brief summary of the Yoshida visit; For the English version, Sugita Hideaki, “The First Contact between Japanese and Iranians as Seen through Travel Diaries” in Renee Worringer, *The Islamic Middle East and Japan Perceptions, Aspirations, and the Birth of Intra-Asian Modernity* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2007), pp. 11-32. See Sugita article “The Arabian Nights in Modern Japan: A Brief Historical Sketch”, pp. 116-153 and in general articles in Yoriko Yamanaka, and Tetsuo Nishio, *The Arabian Nights and Orientalism Perspectives from the East and West*, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006); Yamanaka Yuriko, “Meiji Nihonjin no Perusha taiken Yoshida Masaharu shisatsudan o chūshin ni” *Hikaku Bungaku*, No. 35, 1992: 117-128; Okazaki Shōko, “Meiji no Nihon to Iran Yoshida Masaharu shisetsudan 1880 ni tsuite”, (Meiji Japan and Iran Concerning the Yoshida Masaharu Mission of 1880) *Osaka gaikokugodaigaku gakuhō* Vol. 70, No. 3 1985, pp. 71-86. Nakaoka Saneki, “The Yoshida Masaharu Mission to Persia and the Ottoman Empire During the Period 1880-1881” *Jōchi Daigaku Gaikokugō Gakubu Kiyō*, No. 24, 1989: 203-235. For recent work see Tadahiko Ohtsu “Captain Furukawa’s First Experience of Persia in the Meiji Era and its Background” in *Chikushi jogakuen daigaku tanki daigaku bu ningen bunka kenyūjō nenpō*, No. 22, 2011 August 31: 223-235. This paper was presented in the Seminar on the 130<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Yoshida Mission which was held in the Iranian Embassy of Tokyo on 25 September 2019. For the general overview of the initial Japanese interaction with the Islamic world and the visit to Iran and Ottoman Turkey. Selçuk Esenbel, “Japanese Interest in the Ottoman empire”, in *The Rising Sun and the Turkish Crescent: New Perspectives on Japanese-Turkish Relations*, Istanbul: Bogazici University Press, 2003, p. 97; Nakaoka Saneki, “Aspects of the Japanese View of Modern West Asia” *The Journal of Sophia Asian Studies*, 5, 1-15, 1987, see p. 5.

Yoshida even claims to have responded with the following tirade on the demerits of taking off shoes. "Since I had dressed in my ceremonial attire, I could not take off my shoes." Yoshida had carried the formal European attire including the shoes and top hat across the Iranian plains in an excruciatingly difficult journey on horseback along the Caravan route. "So, I answered that in Japan it is etiquette that in the Palace one wears shoes in the presence of the Throne and to see the Throne with unclad feet is considered to be of the greatest disrespect". If we are to believe Yoshida, his speech, or tirade overshoes, carried a bit of a cautionary, undiplomatic tone. We do not have the Iranian records to confirm whether Yoshida really continued to add what today would be considered extremely discourteous: "If the Persian court does not want to accept the propriety in our country in their court, which means that we will commit disrespect for this one occasion, then this might make any kind of disrespect possible..."<sup>3</sup>

Distressed as to what to do, the Persian Foreign Minister could not answer the irate Japanese envoy. The astute Protocol Officer, however, saved the day. Smiling gently, he again whispered down the row passing the message via the interpreter to Yoshida that "an exception will be made today on his behalf". So, Yoshida and the rest of the seven-member Mission proudly had their audience with the Shah, keeping their shoes on. Later Yoshida was in a self-congratulatory mood when the British Minister in Tehran proclaimed that this was a cause for celebration. Yoshida as a newcomer had broken away the old customs of the court which for years required that diplomats could only have an audience with the Persian Throne without shoes. Yoshida is the pure, new Meiji elite of "civilization and enlightenment", the *bunmei kaika* of Westernism as he pompously narrates the incident in his travel account, *Kaikyō tanken: Perusha no tabi* (The Expedition to the Islamic World: The Journey to Persia) that was published in 1894. Yoshida claims that he does not want to brag but explains that "instigating a newcomer to break the practice of old customs is a well-known method of old veteran diplomats because they need to avoid fighting to install proper practices and not notice the displeasure in front of one's eyes in order to remain close to the sensibility of an alien and old entity".<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Yoshida, *Perusha*, pp. 141-142.

<sup>4</sup> Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 142.

Yoshida's firsthand account has been criticized by some Japanese scholars of the Middle East who were critical of Yoshida's prejudiced Westernist approach to the Muslim world- i.e. the shoe debacle.<sup>5</sup> In hindsight Yoshida's travel account can be recognized as having formed the frame of Japanese stereotyping of the Middle East and the Muslim world in a negative light by stating that it was not modern like the West or Japan. The Yoshida account does reveal to us some of the enduring perceptions as well as stereotyped images among the general Japanese public even today depicting Islam as an alien religion and the Middle Eastern world as a strange geography: exotic but alien, fascinating but also unfamiliar. Still, the Muslim world is seen as not quite compatible with the modern ideals of Japan and yet close to it as part of Asia displaying the dilemma of "Westernism" and "Asianism" in the Japanese psyche. But the travel account should not be simply seen as a foundational text of Japanese attitudes toward the Muslim world.

This paper argues that the Yoshida travelogue reveals to us the complex cultural and political layers with which Yoshida saw Qajar Iran and provides an instructive journey into the mind of a nineteenth century Meiji Japanese elite who still carried their Edo cultural background as well as the more obvious Westernism of the new regime. The Yoshida travelogue starts with the political agenda of the Meiji government in this Japanese Mission to the Muslim Hemisphere that contrasts with the earlier 1871-1873 famous Iwakura Mission to the West. This later mission to the "Muslim West" did not necessarily bring back know-how for modernity that could be adapted for Japan's reforms, but it brought back crucial knowledge about contemporariness of global conditions and particularly an assessment of global politics. One can also detect the roots of Japan's strategic perception of the Middle East and the Muslim World as an arena in the global rivalry between the Great Powers but also as a potential region for Japan's entry as a new commercial interest and possibly a friendly contact zone.

Despite this "shoe and civilization" mode of Yoshida's attitude toward

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5 Komura Fujio, *Nihon isuramu shi* (Tokyo: Nihon isuramu yukorenmei, 1988), pp. 42-43, is typical of the pre-war and post-war Islam experts in Japan who were strongly critical of the "Westernist" orientation of Japanese elites.

Iranians, the analysis of the travelogue helps us decipher the Japanese anguish over civilized behavior and survival amidst the global order forged by the Western imperial powers during the nineteenth century. Thus, by focusing on Yoshida's account of another "non-Western" country such as Iran, this discussion exposes an instructive and picturesque journey that emancipates the reader from the binary of looking at modern Japanese experience solely via how the Japanese contrasted their situation with the "Western" world. Yoshida's Persia interpretation thus forms a tertiary perspective on the Meiji Japanese anxiety in forging a new Japanese modern identity shifting between Europe and Asia that enriches our understanding of the self-reflection of being a Meiji Japanese person in the midst of the nineteenth century.

The travel account will show that Westernism initially colored Yoshida's perception of Persia and the Shah's reform attempt. But, in the course of his engagement with this alien new world of Muslim Persia, Yoshida groped for explanations of the dilemmas that faced Meiji Japan via his Persian experience. The Persian encounter taught him about the contemporary challenges in the international order threatened by the rivalry between the British and Russian empires. Yoshida's excruciating attempt to decipher the culturally and geographically alien surroundings of the Persian world led him to create a new Chinese character-based vocabulary. In sum, the journey into the heart of the Persian Middle East instigated new political, social, and linguistic understanding of his contemporary global world.

### **The Anguish of Civilized Behavior**

Read today, Yoshida's "incident" surfaces as crass, at least from the perspective of the Iranian court and particularly Yoshida's hunger to get the approval of the Western, i.e. British envoy in Tehran makes one cringe. The mini-crisis must have looked simply as unmannerly to the sophisticated bureaucrats of the Persian court whose etiquette traditions they thought had pretty much formed the basis of civilized courtly behavior in the greater East Mediterranean ever since the days of Alexander the Great in antiquity. It certainly was the case for the Muslim world since medieval times.

To our eyes today, the event appears particularly pathetic as Yoshida came from a culture where until recently taking off shoes indoors in a formal audience was the ancient courtly tradition. Only a few years ago, that one could not have an audience with the Shogun with shoes on showed how quickly the Meiji leaders had “discarded the old ways” and adopted a strict Western public image, particularly in the international arena.

But it was not a pathetic event in the context of the day, for during the nineteenth century, formal dress and courtly ritual of European monarchies, particularly the French tradition of “civilized” norms in etiquette and diplomacy, dominated the international system, and the practice and knowledge of the European elite practices had become very important as symbols of power and prestige. The Gaimushō particularly prided itself on the ability to speak and practice European culture.<sup>6</sup>

For the Non-European powers, who adapted to European norms in various degrees, European dress and adaptation of courtly rituals became part of the material performance of a government’s intentions vis-à-vis the degree of adopting Western know-how and methods. Non-European polities which accepted European methods and know-how for reforms represented their new policies in the change of dress and manners as part of the larger transformation of the environment in European style architectural forms and artistic aesthetic. The Meiji government in 1872 had already passed a law that had made Western attire the requirement for all male public officials. The Meiji leaders intended to enhance the public image and authority of Emperor Meiji in the European monarchial tradition by the adoption of court rituals and ceremonies. In his well-distributed photograph, the young Meiji Emperor had his portrait taken in a European military uniform with lavish gold tassels and embroidery, although he clearly did not look very happy for the occasion. This was the official image of the new Japan that had chosen to accept Western civilization.

Yoshida was a product of this new image of blending into the Western norms of dress and etiquette that became part of the *Rokumeikan*<sup>7</sup> diplo-

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6 Barbara J. Brooks, *Japan’s Imperial Diplomacy Consuls, Treaty Ports, and War in China 1895-1938*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, pp. 49-50 for professional affectations of European airs in the Gaimushō.

7 *Rokumeikan* diplomacy. The name *Rokumeikan*, Deer Cry Pavillion, comes from a Chinese clas-

macy involving cultural politics in treaty-revision that Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru had greatly fostered to convince the Western diplomats and residents in Tokyo of Japan's modernity. The high elite's "obsession" with European dress and airs was the brunt of the vehement critique of the press as an imitative, superficial copy of European ways.

At a higher psychological plane, we can understand the dilemma of Yoshida as a version of Norbert Elias's "civilizing process" which had entailed the change in public etiquette and manners in the making of modern Europe that spread forth beyond the geographic frontiers of Europe in the West to the so-called "Non-Western" societies, irrevocably part of the global project for taking European know-how. Reforms in the "East" also involved the adoption of "European" dress, and the practice of public rituals, and manners. One can surmise that the shift was a doubly "tension-ridden" experiment for the Ottomans, the Persians, and the Japanese, as well as other peoples who had to change themselves by giving up "old ways", sometimes totally. But that is an issue that is not directly relevant to understanding Yoshida's dilemma in 1880, although it might explain why he was so nervous about the topic of shoes.<sup>8</sup>

The Qajar Court, in the person of Shah Nasir al-Din and his high bureaucrats also adopted the attire of the European high elite on formal occasions and the new Iranian palaces were a combination of European and Iranian aesthetic, though, in comparison to the Ottoman court, the Iranian court kept more faithfully the traditional practices as seen in this case of "taking off shoes" in the imperial audience as a sign of deference to the Shah. The photographs and the paintings of the era show the Shah and the Iranian elite dressed in a European formal attire with a Fez like headgear or a high astrakhan top hat, but they are also shown in traditional Persian attire as well. A few months later, Yoshida was not to be required to take

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sic referring to the gentle braying of deer in the garden as an atmosphere of hospitality. The Italian style villa was built by the British architect Josiah Conder that served as the social meeting place of elite Japanese and Western diplomats and residents in Tokyo and as an official foreign guest house. It was criticized in the press as a symbol of dissipation and extreme Westernization. Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru thought that socialization with Westerners will help Japan's diplomatic effort to revise the "unequal treaties".

8 Selcuk Esenbel, "The Anguish of Civilized Behavior: The Use of Western Cultural Forms in the Everyday Lives of the Meiji Japanese and the Ottoman Turks During the Nineteenth Century", *Japan Review*, 1994 5: 145-185

off his shoes in Istanbul when the Japanese Mission was to meet with Abdulhamid II and his high officials.

Yoshida's attitude contrasts the "traditionalism" of the Iranian or the Ottoman elites who, strongly aware of Muslim constraints and cultural identity, incorporated a unique headgear such as the Fez or the Astrakhan cap for men and the women's veil over European dress. Yoshida's attitude represented the specific type of eclecticism that the Meiji elite had chosen to incorporate western dress, rituals, etiquette, and manners into the civilizing process in conjunction with the reform milieu of the age by clearly delineating the boundaries of a dual and separate 'pure Western identity' versus a 'pure Japanese one'.

But all of this was a little early to explain Yoshida's reaction in 1880. For Yoshida, the public appearance of a Japanese envoy in the Qajar court had to reiterate the 'pure' Western credentials of Japan. We do not know whether the Persian court really changed their ritual by no longer requiring diplomats to take off their shoes in the presence of the Shah after Yoshida or had they simply shown a momentary tolerance to this nervous Japanese diplomat whom they did not consider a political threat and wanted to make him at ease-which was more likely the case.

### **The Yoshida Mission Journey**

In 1880, Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru, who was forced to resign after the virulent crisis over treaty revision in 1887, had decided to send Yoshida Masaharu (1851-1921) of the Ministry as the head of the first official Japanese mission to visit Qajar Persia and Ottoman Turkey. Known as a liberal constitutionalist, Yoshida Masaharu was from a samurai family of Tosa domain, one of the coalition domains that had orchestrated the Meiji Restoration. The first son of Yoshida Toyō Masaaki, the Chief executive of the Tosa clan who was assassinated in 1862, he studied English and law in Tokyo. Yoshida's patrons were Gotō Shōjirō, Itagaki Taisuke and Prince Iwakura Tomomi, all major protagonists of the Meiji Restoration. Prince Iwakura had had close relations with Yoshida's father. In 1879, Yoshida entered the newly founded Ministry of Foreign Affairs and had been

promoted to the highest rank of junior officials, which was a factor in his choice as the leader of the expedition.<sup>9</sup>

Known as the Yoshida Mission, the ostensible purpose of this first Japanese expedition into the Middle East was to inquire about the possibility of concluding commercial treaties and collect first-hand extensive information about the conditions in these countries as possible markets for Japanese export products. But the real motive was to become the investigation of the Great Power rivalry between Britain and Russia over Persia and Ottoman Turkey and collect as much information as possible on the existing networks and conditions of politics, culture, and society in the “Muslim hemisphere”, *Kaikyō ken*. Compared to the focused intention of the Japanese who visited Ottoman Istanbul and Egypt earlier in 1873 to find out about the legal rights of Europeans under Consular courts, the Yoshida Mission, thus, had a more general agenda. This picturesque journey into the heartland of Persia was to be a *tanken*, an expedition to transmit the whole Muslim world’s state of affairs to Japan. This was the first official contact of Meiji Japan with the sovereign governments in the region. It was also the first time that the Meiji Japanese travelled directly from Japan to the Middle East by sailing into the Persian Gulf, bordering today’s Iran and Iraq.

The journey of Yoshida Masaharu and his team took a little over a year to complete. The Mission took off in March, Meiji 13, 1880 and ended sometime at the end of May, Meiji, 1881 when Yoshida returned to Japan. After they crossed the Indian Ocean and arrived in the Persian Gulf in the middle of the summer, (Yoshida arrived in May 20, Furukawa and Yokoyama on June 29, the rest arrived with the Japanese naval frigate Hiei on July 9) the Japanese Mission of seven members including an Army officer representing the newly established *Sanbō Honbu*, the Japanese General Staff, and five businessmen, settled in the little port-city of Basra, known as Bushehr, the sea-port town along the Iranian coast of the Gulf. Yoshida and a small group sailed up the Tigris river into Bagdad and toured the ancient Roman sites of Hebron. On July 25, the group finally embarked from Bushehr on horseback with a mule caravan that would traverse across the Iranian highlands up to the capital Teheran north. Bushehr, the

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9 Nakaoka, “The Mission”, pp. 234.



long-standing post of the Dutch East India Co., and later the British East India Co., was a town which served historically as the main seaport for oceanic trade. The Iranians had surrendered the port to the British in 1856 and it had become the site for the British empire's political influence in the Persian Gulf. In their official status as the special guests of the Iranian monarchy, the Japanese team proceeded to take the traditional caravan route further into the deep hinterland of Persia, usually staying in the Iranian government's Caravan Inns. They were hosted by the local governors of Shiraz and Isfahan. After they arrived in Teheran on September 7, the Yoshida Mission stayed about 120 days in Teheran during which time on September 27 they had important audience with Shah Nasir al-Din, the reformer of Iran. In the meantime, the mission tried to form some local contacts by showing off sample wares of Japanese export items such as porcelain, tea, silk, and lacquerware to the local bazaar merchants in the presumable hope of attracting export business, an important objective of the mission. Leaving on December 31, 1880, the group travelled extensively through the Russian territories of the Caucasus and the Black Sea, from which they sailed on February 12, 1881, into the Ottoman capital, Istanbul. In contrast to the three-month stay in Iran, the Yoshida Mission's stay in Ottoman Turkey was quite short. The Japanese envoys had two audiences on March 12, and March 21, with the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II, who was an avid admirer of Japan, the Grand Vizier Said Pasha, and the Ministers. On March 22, the Yoshida Mission finally left Istanbul by boat, moving on to Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Austria whereupon the members separated and returned to Japan on their own at different times throughout the summer.<sup>10</sup>

The Yoshida Mission's experience can be interpreted as a small-scale Iwakura Mission, that famous Meiji government's mission headed by Prince Iwakura, which visited the major capitals of the West between 1871-1873, hoping to revise the "unequal" treaties of 1858 and to attain an equal status for Japan amongst the Western powers in international law. The Mission's goal failed in the face of a haughty refusal in the major capitals of the West. But the Iwakura Mission members were also set out

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<sup>10</sup> See Nakaoka, "The Mission", p. 205 for summary.

to investigate the conditions of the modern 'civilized' world. The latter objective succeeded as the Mission brought back an immense amount of reports that would help inform the reform effort at home. The Yoshida Mission succeeded in investigating the conditions in the Muslim polities, namely the Ottoman empire and the Qajar Monarchy between Europe and Asia, and brought back information that formed the Meiji political elite's general view of Islam as a civilization. One could suggest that the Yoshida Mission formed the basic tenets of future Japanese foreign policy toward the countries and peoples of the Middle East.

Before departure, the objective of the Yoshida Mission had already expanded way beyond the initial purpose of seeking commercial markets to a much larger charge of investigating practically everything about the world of Islam in this region. Like the Iwakura Mission whose huge piles of reports and documents formed the foundation of the Meiji leaders of the Western world, Yoshida and Captain Furukawa Nobuyoshi who represented the *Sanbō Honbu*, left the first detailed records of this journey. Both reports and materials, which were subsequently submitted to the authorities in Japan, became major sources of information about Qajar Persia and Ottoman Turkey in the upper echelons of the future Japanese government.

We understand that the merchant members also wrote diaries and travel accounts, but they have not been found yet. Later both Yoshida and Furukawa published modified versions of the material in book form. Noteworthy is the fact that Yoshida's book, that constitutes the primary material of this paper, was published on the eve of the 1895 Sino-Japanese War, and was geared toward the general public not only to inform them about Iran but also to warn the public about the Great Game between Russian and British imperialism in Central Asia. The book is said to have had a particular impact among Japanese diplomats and educated readers. Furukawa's book published by the *Sanbō Honbu* General Staff in 1891, was not for sale and obviously had limited circulation. The two works have formed the basis of the Meiji elites' understanding of the Ottoman and Persian worlds for a long time.<sup>11</sup>

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11 Furukawa Nobuyoshi, *Perusha Kikō* (The Persia Journey) (Tokyo: Sanbō Honbu, 1891).

## The Harrowing Caravan Expedition

The Yoshida Mission was a harrowing experience that marked the lingering “negative” impression of the Middle East as an alien environment for many Japanese in the future. During 1871-73, the large Iwakura Mission of 48 members were in pursuit of enlightenment and civilization to be transferred from the West and had enjoyed the “modern” comforts of Western cities and the efficiency of railroad travel in their three-year sojourn. In 1880, a decade later, the Yoshida Mission had to learn about the Muslim world literally the hard way by travelling to the Persian Gulf in the middle of the summer (one wonders why they would make such a horrible mistake) and then taking the Caravan route to the Persian capital Teheran up north on horseback, using camel and mule caravans under the harshest climates ranging from burning heat in the desert to the icy cold of the mountain ranges. The physical hardship in itself determined much of the negative impressions formed by the group of the region. In his introduction to the travel account, Yoshida notes that they had the opportunity to experience every single kind of geographic topography that one only reads about in geography books.<sup>12</sup>

Travelling in Iran along the caravan route from Bushehr to Isfahan, Shiraz, Persepolis, and finally Teheran, between July 25 and September 7, during the hottest season in the region, the Yoshida Mission survived a very hard journey crossing the high mountains and the deserts along the way that contributed to their generally negative view of the Muslim Persian world. During the very difficult land trek, they faced an extraordinary number of problems from bandits, lack of clean water, and the harsh climates of the desert and highlands of the Iranian interior. The Japanese group faced radical changes of not only of weather from scorching heat to freezing ice-cold conditions, but periodic dangerous encounters with wild beasts and bandits. Yoshida’s graphic account describes the hard journey of the Japanese group who were quite unprepared to travel, literally hopping about in their saddles on horses and mules. Unlike the legendary Persian horses that the Tokugawa greatly admired, Captain Furukawa also notes that the caravan animals were skinny and haggard.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Yoshida, *Perusha*, “Introduction”, pp. 1-2.

<sup>13</sup> Furukawa, *Perusha no kikō*, p. 192, p. 98 in Sugita, “The First Contact”, p. 15. and p. 28 for note 12.

In an interesting literary analysis of Yoshida's text, Sugita notes that Yoshida, who was not shy of using a prolific amount of embellishment in his narrative, was consciously using classical Chinese compound adjectives, which make the text particularly hard to read today. But he was trying to create a unique language in sound and shape that would convey the fantastic geographical environment that they encountered for the first time. In the same vein, Yoshida tells us vividly that they "crushed underfoot" the highlands and the desert when travelling overland. The experience was like "flying above the clouds" and then descending from the Equator to the Arctic Ocean.<sup>14</sup>

Although up to now, the Japanese had enjoyed the hotels and offices recommended by their Dutch and British contacts during stays in Basra and Bagdad, they now had to go "local" along the journey up to Isfahan and then on to Teheran which added to their chagrin. The Japanese Mission stayed in the *Chapar*, the station hostels of the Persian government which was actually relatively better abodes assigned for the travel of officials and visitors along the way compared to the depravity of the *manzil*, ordinary caravan inns for regular folk. Although this was the more comfortable and faster route of travel, Yoshida complained that there was no proper food or bedding. At some point during the journey, the Mission split, as the Japanese merchants who had to carry a large amount of sample wares had to join the regular Caravan travelers, which were slower and endured worse accommodations in the *manzil* according to their account.

This first encounter between the Japanese and the farmers and tribes in the hinterland of Persia must have been unforgettable and quite unlike the "grand tour" excursions of many travelers in the Middle East that usually was restricted to European and Mediterranean urban sites. Since the locals thought that foreigners were capable of providing medical help, Yoshida gave carbonated soda to an ailing person and helped with minor health problems of the locals who appear to have greatly appreciated the gesture.<sup>15</sup> One of the members, Tsuchida, almost died as he fell off his mount and was lost in the desert where he was found by local farmers who carried him to the inn nearby and gave him bread and yogurt. He

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<sup>14</sup> Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 64.

<sup>15</sup> Yoshida, *Perusha*, pp. 66-68; Okazaki, "Meiji no nihon", p. 76.

is said to have brought that bread back home to Japan and placed it on a Shinto shrine.<sup>16</sup> Despite Yoshida's own reasonably well-prepared clothing and supplies, at least he seems to have read up on the travel accounts of British travelers to the region, surprisingly, most members of the Japanese mission were unprepared with uniforms for this difficult journey ahead and found themselves quite insufficient in terms of specifically suitable clothing. Yoshida himself had a Persian traveling bag which contained one outfit for everyday use and another one for ceremonial purposes, the famous shoes included, a medicine box, a kitchen knife, a couple of spoons, a brass dish, and a water glass. For self-defense, he carried a sword and a small pistol. The Persian cook was entrusted with the cooking, canned goods, meat, and powdered milk.<sup>17</sup>

Some of the Japanese dressed in Iranian style clothing, procured in the region, others in European attire. Only Yoshida and the military members of the mission such as Captain Furukawa knew how to ride horses, and that created a problem for the rest of the group. The merchants apparently had great difficulty staying on their mounts. Since the Mission mostly travelled during the night in order to avoid the scorching heat, this was to be a serious problem for fear of losing some of the members. Some of the Japanese merchants carried old-fashioned short Japanese swords clasped to their waist as if they were in the Tokugawa period. Yoshida notes that this was probably their first time since the Meiji Restoration, harkening back to the old days during New Year visits, when merchants would be allowed to wear short swords as part of their formal attire.<sup>18</sup> He also acknowledged that the merchant members of the group were simply not used to this kind of hardship, travelling under very difficult physical and climatic conditions, and to make do without food or water at times until reaching a station.<sup>19</sup>

The travel account is peppered with this complaining tone about the alien social culture which was made more unbearable with the harsh conditions of travel, mostly on horse and mules. When the Japanese group came to Teheran a few days after Yoshida with a caravan, they were

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16 Yoshida, *Perusha*, pp. 56-58; Okazaki, "Meiji no nihon", p. 74.

17 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 55.

18 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 55.

19 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 55.

constantly complaining that this was nothing like what they had imagined when they set out from Japan. Yoshida seems to have felt bad about the situation that he could not ameliorate. He says they had no color in their face, the difficulties were so great. With sickly faces, having travelled for 42 days with soiled clothes, their hats all warped, eyes glaring and beards shabby on withered faces, they just talked on about the horrid difficulties from Isfahan.<sup>20</sup> The whole trip was hard on the nerves. Yoshida confesses that there were problems within the Japanese mission from the beginning. The merchants were inexperienced and often lost patience. Blaming himself for being quite unprepared for the job of keeping everybody in a reasonably satisfactory state of mind, Yoshida is particularly grateful to Yokoyama who already had experience in travel that frequently helped compensate for his deficiencies. But Yoshida notes that everybody turned around in the end since the “Japanese temper has a sense of integrity and responded to my encouragement and went about in every direction in this fierce land.”<sup>21</sup>

### **The Royal Audience**

After arriving in Teheran, Yoshida was greatly disappointed that Foreign Minister Mirza Hosein Khan (1827-1881), who was known for his progressive reforms, and had been the original contact person of the Gaimusho to prepare for the visit, suddenly fell out of favor in the face of conservative opposition from the ulema, the scholastic class. Mirza Hosein Khan who had become prominent in the Foreign Service and had been the Ambassador in Istanbul, was the major reformist Prime Minister of Nasir al-Din Shah. He was responsible for the Shah’s decision to visit the Ottoman Empire and the West including the trip to Russia that had led to contacts with the Japanese government. During his time, Hosein Khan’s reforms were controversial because he gave an extraordinary concession to the British subject Baron Julius de Reuter, of the famed agency, with exclusive rights to railroad, streetcar, mineral extraction, national Bank, industrial and agricultural development projects in lieu of a modest loyalty. Even Lord Curzon had thought that the concession was too extreme. But the plan fell through due to strong Russian pressure and local opposition that accused

<sup>20</sup> Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 126.

<sup>21</sup> Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 124.

the Minister of selling out the assets of the country. He died of mysterious circumstances in 1881 the year that the Yoshida visit took place.<sup>22</sup>

The Japanese visitors had to wait for the appointment of Mirza Aga Ibrahim Khan for the official audience with the Shah. After the new Minister was appointed, in a few days, the Yoshida mission was escorted into the Palace grounds by the Persian government's Cossack brigade who was attired in brilliant uniforms with Astrakhan hats, and were settled into one of the palatial villas. Yoshida's alienation from this environment is particularly obvious here when he even interprets what actually was a gesture of ceremonial courtesy in negative terms. When the Cossack brigade accompanied the Japanese who were riding in the midst of the entourage on the specially saddled horses sent from the Shah into the palace gates, Yoshida says "We must have looked like live captives to bystanders". He is also annoyed that the Persian government assigned two guards outside of their residence who did little more than just expect tips (*bahshesh*) or that he had to spend so much time drinking coffee and tobacco with minor officials or the Foreign Ministry's interpreter (who became the intermediary for everything), and so on. In the meantime, Yoshida and the group displayed the sample wares that they had brought with them in the European style inn where they stayed which they still thought much preferable to the Palatial residence that the Shah had specially allocated for them. Concerned about the reception of their wares by the local officials, Yoshida, who was aware of the innovative reformist personality of Shah Nasir al-Din in pioneering new trends, sent some samples to the palace that he heard had pleased the potentate.<sup>23</sup>

The Yoshida mission's official audience (when the shoe crisis occurred) on September 27, 1880, with Shah Nasir al-Din is of particular interest because it reveals the astute questions of the Shah which were probably prepared in conjunction with his bureaucrats, who were quite intent on finding out about this new Japan. Yoshida's careful answers are interesting because they represent the official portrait that Meiji Japan diplomatically preferred to present to this Near Eastern monarchy.

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22 Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran : Roots and Results of Revolution*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) pp. 49, 54-56.

23 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 144.

In the text, Yoshida is obviously pleased with the formal courtesy with which the reception takes place at this point. The day before the planned audience, Yoshida and the son of the new foreign minister, and the interpreter Mirza Ali who accompanied Yoshida ever since Bushehr, went over the details of the protocol to be followed in the audience. The Japanese mission was saluted with a presentation of arms inside the Palace gate. Throughout the journey, Yoshida would look at the Iranian officials with a condescending air, except for his good friend Mirza Ali and a few others whom he would befriend by the end of the 120-day long residency in the country. Yoshida preferred to associate with Iranians who had European education and disdained 'pure Persian types' that reinforced the cultural dichotomy in his negative view of Persian society. Just before the audience, the new Iranian Foreign Minister Ibrahim and his son came to explain the ceremony about the imperial audience with the Shah. The Minister annoyed Yoshida by asking whether he could also kindly put in a good word to the Shah by praising the fact that the government officials have been quite diligent and that there was no negligence in the treatment of the Japanese guests, which was essentially true. After all, the problems that Yoshida faced regarding the discomforts of travel generally plagued the Iranians as well. Even his account reveals that he was received with courtesy in all of the major stops along the way. But Yoshida finds this new request to put in a good word for the bureaucracy an affront to his personality, as he would "neither complain in an imperial audience but nor would he stoop to such flattery". But then, he adds, the Minister who is a "pure Persian" would not understand the principle even if he explained it to him.<sup>24</sup>

Yoshida is, however, very pleased that he could get all the Japanese merchants included in the audience, a rare event in any country. He speculates that the consent might have been because the Iranians wanted to see at firsthand what the Japanese looked like *as a specimen of humanity* or was it truly because of the Shah's magnanimous gesture? Yoshida's obsession with race permeates the text.<sup>25</sup>

Quickly and vigorously going up the stairs after solving the 'shoe crisis', Yoshida entered the audience hall where the Persian officials were on

24 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 141.

25 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 141.



their knees in a deep bow with their heads bowed. The Shah was seated in a big chair attired in a majestic uniform studded back and forth with real precious stones. Yoshida performed a deep bow and turning toward the Shah he gave the official speech on behalf of the Japanese government "... desirous of the prosperity and august health of the Sovereign and thanking him profusely for having kindly originated the friendship between the East and West of Asia which will magnify His Majesty's benevolence, friendship and justice." The official report that Yoshida submitted to the Foreign Ministry later included the full text of Yoshida's address that was quite long and began with a very flowery praise of the Shah's reforms as "...one glorious light after another with every passing year. Such a performance has no comparison in the history of Asia".<sup>26</sup> Both Yoshida and the Shah posited the relations between Japan and Persia as the shared geography of the East and West of Asia, reminiscent of the notion that Asia is one emerged before Okakura Tenshin's famous essay, *The Ideas of the East* which argued the cultural idea of Asia as one and was published in 1903. The Shah refers to Japan as an Eastern government like Persia and states that even if there is a great distance between Japan and Persia, "we both inhabit the same Asian continent, therefore, our spirit is the same as that of the Japanese Emperor."<sup>27</sup>

The Shah proceeded to ask pointed questions about Japan's level of technology, Europeanization, and political system. Lamenting the lack of railways in his own country, but expressing the intention to build them, the Shah asked whether "foreigners build the railways and provide the machinery for Japanese railways", to which Yoshida pointed out that "the national government builds the railways and only the tools for the railroad are imported, the rest are domestically manufactured". The whole tone of the conversation concerns the Shah's particular interest on whether Japan's new modernizing effort is primarily foreign-inspired or national in character. Yoshida assures the Shah that although foreigners were used quite extensively earlier, now the Japanese have taken over.<sup>28</sup>

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26 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 149; Nakaoka, "The Mission", pp. 216-221, 214 for praise.

27 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 141.

28 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 149.

When the Shah asks whether the Japanese Emperor presides personally over matters of state or delegates to ministers, Yoshida's careful response portrays the Meiji Emperor as a monarch totally in charge and as an autocrat who personally undertook all matters only to be assisted by the cabinet ministers. The Shah's question about the constitution of Japan meaning the political system and the recent changes over the traditional bifurcated form of the Japanese monarchy with the division of power between the Emperor and the Shogun shows him to be well-aware of the political changes as a result of the 1868 Meiji Restoration. Yamada explained that the Shogun's office which was simply an administrative custom is now abolished. Furthermore, he stresses that Japan's constitution has been based upon the unbroken line of sovereigns over 123 generations and spanning 2541 years. Here, Yoshida's response emphasizes the extraordinarily durable strength of the constitutional nature of Japan which has remained unchanged despite the new administrative edicts and laws, assuring the Shah of the absolute power of the Japanese monarch. This was in keeping with the official ideology of the Meiji monarchy which ascribed the "unbroken succession" of the Japanese Imperial line to the Throne as the backbone of Japan's "modern myths" in Carol Gluck's terms rather than his own personal advocacy of a Constitutional monarchy with rights and liberties.<sup>29</sup>

The dialog proceeded about how the mission sailed to the Persian Gulf with Yoshida making the point that the Japanese naval battleship Hiei was used and that the journey took only 60 days in total, although with a speedy vessel it should be accomplished in 45 days. The Shah asked about the military strength of Japan's Army in comparison to that of China, in terms of European-style training.<sup>30</sup>

The general tone of the conversation is quite candid about ascertaining the European style reforms of Japan with emphasis on its national character. The Shah asked Yoshida to introduce the members of the mission one by one and paid personal attention to each. He also asked point-blank whether they have come to investigate the commercial conditions

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29 Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths: Ideology in the Late Meiji Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

30 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 149.

in Persia and whether the Mission will return back to Japan directly or visit European countries as well. The lengthy conversation ended with the Shah expressing his desire to open the way for close relations between Persia and Japan and that commerce can pave the way for this purpose. The ceremony ended with the presentation of royal decorations to Yoshida, Yokoyama, and Furukawa.<sup>31</sup>

Yoshida included the full text of his address and the conversation with the Shah to Foreign Minister Inoue in a report dated October 16, 1880. The Shah's response was delivered to Yoshida on a later date, in a "fair copy written in that country's language with and English translation on a thick paper of gold paint" that remains in the Gaimusho Diplomatic Record Office to this day.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the extraordinary flowery language of Yoshida, the historian Nakaoka finds the Shah's response friendly but vague. The Qajar court was possibly concerned about Japan's true intentions. The Shah considered the Emperor of Japan akin to that of a well-beloved brother and sufficed by "wishing" for friendship and amity.<sup>33</sup> The procedure for the audience was arduous. Yoshida spoke in Japanese, Yokoyama translated it into English, Mirza Ali Khan interpreted the English into Persian.

Still, the audience was a great success. Yoshida and the mission were barged with invitations and courteous visits by officials and diplomats in the days that remained. The eruption of a Kurdish rebellion in the countryside made the second audience impossible, but the Japanese Mission enjoyed the hospitality of the Shah and made frequent trips around the country.

On December 30, at 9 o'clock in the morning, the mission departed after a lively series of farewells and banquets from the Persian officials who had been hosting them for more than three months! The diplomatic community in Tehran also contributed to the festivities. The Russian Minister provided the letters to go through the Caucasus territories, now under Russian authority. On 30 December, 1880, the English translator and guide Mirza Ali Khan Atabak from the Foreign Ministry, by now a very good friend, and the Minister of Commerce, accompanied the Yoshida

31 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 149.

32 Nakaoka, "The Mission", p. 213.

33 Nakaoka, "The Mission", p. 216.

Mission to outside of the city gates. Mirza Ali gave one of the businessmen, Tsuchida, the copy of “*Tarikh-e Wassaf*” (The History of Wassaf), the classic work of the famous historian of the medieval Ilhanid Mongol court which was written around 1332, as a present. Much later the Tsuchida family donated the work, with other materials that Tsuchida had brought, to Tokyo University where it has been only very recently discovered.<sup>34</sup>

With the letters of the Russian minister for the Khanates in the Caucasus along the way, Yoshida tells us that the return trip to Istanbul was much more comfortable.<sup>35</sup>

### **Civilization and Enlightenment Faces Racism**

Yoshida’s critical commentary on Iran revealed the Japanese adoption of European racism as an ideological fact, racializing countries according to their ‘civilizing’ mission for modernity.<sup>36</sup> The Meiji discourse on civilization and enlightenment, or, *bunmei kaika*, also was wrought with the conceptualization of a racialized global hierarchy of nations. The nineteenth century idea of the enlightenment in Meiji Japan was much more of an urgent reformist agenda that was forged under the global context of Western imperialistic hegemony. Enlightenment was necessary for the sake of survival, rather than as a universal aspiration. As Sebastian Conrad notes, the Japanese Meiji intellectual discourse on the enlightenment in such figures as Fukuzawa Yukichi, was part of the nineteenth century global history of Enlightenment discourse beyond Europe and reflected in this combative mission to adopt Western civilization in order to protect oneself against Western imperialism.<sup>37</sup>

The Yoshida narrative is also like a confessional narrative about what it precisely meant to be a Meiji Japanese -Westernized or Europeanized as the term was coined back then- and developing a new sense of being Japanese by striving for enlightenment and civilization while facing the contemporary world in the midst of racism, imperialism, and cultural

34 Yamanaka, “Meiji nihonjin”, p. 127.

35 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 178.

36 Sebastian Conrad, “Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique,” *The American Historical Review*, Volume 117:4, October 2012: 999-1027.

37 Sebastian Conrad, “Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique,” *The American Historical Review*, Volume 117:4, October 2012: 999-1027.

alienation. Yoshida's record of entry into the alien world of the Gulf and beyond starts off with exclamations of serious physical discomfort soon after their arrival in Bushehr, the port of entry into Persia. But there was also severe psychological duress caused by physical hardships. While in Bushehr, the Japanese visitors suffered under the blinding sunshine and heat, which was made worse with platoons of mosquitoes and flies. Yoshida says that the merchants were constantly complaining and just wanted to pack their goods and leave.<sup>38</sup>

The trip from Bombay on an English steamship had been no better. The terrible experience had been a micro-level exhibition of racist rudeness-typical of nineteenth century European colonial behavior. The English captain who appears to have been a cruel maniac severely mistreated the Indian staff on the ship. Yoshida notes "as was the practice of the English in India", which disturbed all onlookers including the Japanese. Worse was the humiliation in the hands of the captain. Yoshida comments that as we "did not have the appearance of White men" he treated us in the same rude manner as the Indian passengers. The captain screamed and shouted at the ship orderly even went to the extent of kicking the poor servant over the taste of the food and even threw knives at him, totally impervious to how the passengers were aghast. So horrible was the mood on the ship, that as the steamer approached Bushehr all the passengers and the Japanese group who were so tired of the Captain's crazed pomposity literally 'abandoned ship' in a rush and went on land.<sup>39</sup>

The Persian authorities were waiting in Bushehr for the Yoshida Mission. The interpreter of the local foreign affairs bureau of the Iranian government and the special team of horses sent by the Persian governor transported the Yoshida Mission to the house of a local Armenian merchant and settled them into a "dusty room with shoddy chairs scattered about". Though rescued from the taunts of the English captain, this time it was "culture shock" that plagued the group. The Persian interpreter who was trying to make the Japanese group comfortable had lunch ready in the room but the "oily smell of pure Persian food pierced our nostrils making

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<sup>38</sup> Yoshida, *Perusha*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>39</sup> Yoshida, *Perusha*, pp. 16-17.

us wish we were back in the ship where we were rudely treated.” The rest of the time, Yoshida met with the governor preparing for the trip to Tehran. The group which was introduced to the local merchants through their interpreter spent time in the local bazaar just getting some impressions of the conditions for foreign trade. They had to change their lodgings three times for fear of scorpions because none of the inns had high beds. Rescued by the Dutch, the Japanese Mission was finally happy with the kind help of Mr. Holtz and rented the second floor above his store.<sup>40</sup>

Although the Japanese group’s attitude toward the local Arab and Iranian natives was distanced and not particularly friendly, Yoshida’s self-reflections about how they must have appeared to the locals, reveals the self-examination that was prevalent among the educated Japanese about their modern identity as a person and as a people that still survives to this date. Anchored in the classic dilemma of whether the Japanese are culturally Asian or European, and whether they are part of Eastern or Western civilization, Japanese men and women have continued such self-questioning about their national identity and modernity in temporal and spatial terms. After first living in Persian style, when the group moved on to live with the Dutch, Yoshida saw the cultural implications of this simple shift. The choice was obviously Yoshida’s preference for being part of the modern European world in the alien Middle East, in addition to the comforts of a high bed away from scorpions. But one comes away with the sense that of all the Europeans, Yoshida’s group particularly preferred to form friendly intimacy with the Dutch, who were the European cultural community that the Japanese had known since the Tokugawa period.

Yoshida’s comments contain the awareness that everyday habits constituted the benchmarks of one’s affiliation to different civilizing worlds. Yoshida wonders what the locals must think of the Japanese both racially and culturally. This was a question which was probably not that important for the Europeans in the Gulf who went about living their own lives in contained environments within the local community and knew themselves to be “Frenk” or foreign anyway.

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40 Yoshida, *Perusha*, pp. 16-17.

When the Arab and Persian customers in the Persian style inn saw the Japanese faces, Yoshida felt “we could credulously be mistaken for Indian or an Arab people”. But, when they noticed how the Japanese could also sit upright on carpets like the locals and that they similarly liked to eat rice, these were signs of cultural affinity. Yoshida notices that the locals began to be at ease and actually started to like the Japanese because they were mild-mannered, unlike the brash Europeans. The demarcation line was eating habits, however. The locals called the habits of the Japanese “Fringistan” considering them to be like the Europeans when they preferred to use knives, forks, and spoons. The Japanese also drank alcohol and ate pork, shellfish, and beef, which Yoshida says Muslims did not eat. The other local guests in the Persian style inn started to invite the Japanese to share their meals. However, the Mission members did not want to go as the locals and “use their fingers as natural chopsticks”. They made sure to always use some kind of a wooden stick as a temporary chopstick to eat. Finally, when the Mission started to live with the Dutch, the Japanese group appeared happy to be able to resort to the European ways of living.<sup>41</sup>

Yoshida wonders how this shift of cultural habits and abode must have appeared to the local people, who initially would have thought that the Japanese visitors were like them. Now that the Japanese preferred to live with the Dutch and followed “Fringistan” manners, the locals must have been greatly surprised at “the revelation of this dark inner identity” like the inner lining of one’s stomach (*tachimachi kokutohi wo roken suru ni itari*).<sup>42</sup>

Yoshida’s evaluation of Qajar Iran designates it to be at the level of the semi-enlightened polities of the Orient, *tōyō*, like Qing China to which he makes frequent analogies pursuing the trail of Fukuzawa’s argument about the hierarchy of nations as “enlightened” and “semi-enlightened” countries. Yoshida concludes that the reforms of the Shah in introducing European education are still underdeveloped. The Holy Koran overwhelmingly dominates law and the educational system.<sup>43</sup> The Persian military system is laughable, consisting of a collection of tribes similar to the Eight Banner

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41 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 16-21.

42 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 21 for stomach.

43 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 170.

Army of China.<sup>44</sup> The provincial system of administration and military forces are again similar to that of China with provincial governors having a high degree of local autonomy over the life and death of the inhabitants. Since the orders of the ruler have to be completely obeyed, the people can only protect their prosperity if they can get the governor on their side.<sup>45</sup>

But there are moments when Yoshida develops a comparative perspective that explains the Persian environment in the context of past Japanese history, and which globalizes Japanese and Persian experiences with respect to each other without the West. Yoshida uses early Japanese Buddhist history in a novel manner to explain Persia to Japanese readers. He explains the Shia Islam religious tradition of Persia and the historic conflict with the Ottoman Sunna tradition by an analogy to the conflict between the Lotus Sutra sect, *Hokkekyō*, of the *Nichiren* order and the True Pure Land Sect, the *Jodōshinshu*, during the Warring States period of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, as they fought in the Honganji temple in Kyoto.<sup>46</sup> He claims that Persia is in an Age of Degeneration of Buddhism, *Mappō*, when the energy of worship of God is in decline. The Persian soldiers saunter about with rifles slinking onto their backs, counting prayer beads and mumbling soft prayers from their lips as if they are diligently hoping to see the beautiful virgins in Heaven rather than hoping for the honor of battle to smite evil as the Islamic motto demands.<sup>47</sup>

There is also a contemporary lesson to be learned from the pitfalls of the Persian monarchy in “imitating” the West, through Yoshida’s criticism of Persia’s European-style reforms. Explaining the recent modern history of Persian reforms, Yoshida notes that during the tea parties of the few foreign residents of Teheran, he overheard their conversations criticizing the Persian government’s “imitation” of foreign countries and its political and diplomatic blunders. Yoshida learned a lesson from this situation, remembering how foreigners were acting in a similar light in Japan, ridiculing Japanese reformist trials and errors. The tone is the need for the preservation of national dignity. Yoshida argues that it is a nation’s

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44 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 166.

45 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 175.

46 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 171.

47 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 171.



duty to see to it that the native country does not lose its particular characteristics despite European-style reforms. Yoshida describes the recent history of Nasir al-Din Shah's visits to European countries, which became occasions for introducing modern reforms including highways, postal services, European-style education and military training, or granting Russia and Britain concessions for the construction of railways, telegraph lines and mining rights as well as using Austrian officers for training the new army. But for Yoshida, the bravery of the Persian forces that amazed the world had declined. The vigor of the people had weakened.<sup>48</sup>

Yoshida uses this criticism of the Persian experience as a lesson for today's Japanese at the date of the publication, 1895, at the onset of the Sino-Japanese War, who ought not to follow the mere imitation of Europe and yet should make use of European civilization for the country's benefit, which probably reflects the increasingly patriotic-nationalist discourse at the end of the nineteenth century in Japan that overshadowed the liberal revolutionary pro-Western enthusiasm of the early Meiji years. Yoshida notes that although it is good that each country should make use of the merits of others and make up for one's own deficiency, Persia had discarded its own merits before adopting those of others, to the degree that there remained only the demerits.<sup>49</sup>

### **The Fight Between Tigers and Dragons**

At the end of his book, Yoshida makes a strategic analogy to the situation present in Afghanistan and Central Asia in 1894, roughly ten years after the 1880 journey, to argue that Western imperialism threatens the future of Japan by having invaded Central Asia. The British, though "defeated in the hands of the brave Afghan warriors who were deft in the use of the long sword", had proceeded to put up a puppet regime in Afghanistan. On the other hand, Russian forces had killed "all the best soldiers of the Turkoman tribes in Merv". and were making trouble for China in the Kulja frontier, to which the Chinese governor of Gansu was incapable of sending an army to stop Russian activities. He likens this situation to

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48 Sugita, "The First Contact", p. 16; Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 165.

49 Sugita, "The First Contact", p. 16; Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 165.

the fight between “tigers and dragons”. The Persian government’s nimble steps and vacillations against both, which he had observed back in 1880, made him worry whether the same situation might now occur in the Far East. He implies that Persian-style vacillation by Japan against the threat of the Western imperialist powers would be disastrous.<sup>50</sup>

Yoshida also submitted a *Seiryaku*, his strategic evaluation of the Mission’s experience in Iran to the Foreign Ministry which was an in-depth political analysis of British and Russian activities in the Middle East and Central Asia. Analyzed by Nakaoka in full detail, the *Seiryaku* fully reveals that the political objectives of the mission primarily had been to study the British and Russian competition for influence in the region.

It looks as if the Japanese positive response to the Shah’s invitation that was ostensibly desirous of beginning direct relations, had been instrumentally used as a cover-up. The Yoshida Mission had used the opportunity of their official stay in Teheran and the subsequent two-month-long trip to Istanbul, actually, to conduct a careful study of the Russo-Iranian and the Russo-Ottoman border areas. Nakaoka notes that Yokoyama, as the Vice President of Ōkura Holding and the head of the London Branch, played an active role in purchasing munitions in London in preparation for the expected war against China over Korea- this would make it 14 years before the war broke out with China over Korea. Nakaoka argues that the real objective of the Mission was to monitor Russian activities in view of the pending conflict that Russian southward expansion over the Korean peninsula would inevitably create between Japan, China, and Russia. This may have been the case, but the inclusion of the Japanese merchants in the Iran leg of the mission indicated the government’s parallel interest in investigating the traditional Dutch market for Japanese goods as a step to expanding the global markets for Meiji consumer exports.<sup>51</sup>

In the *Seiryaku*, Yoshida makes frequent allusions to a “Persian Gentleman’s” opinion which one strongly suspects was the excellent English interpreter Mirza Ali. He summarizes past British interventions in the region and the recent Russian territorial advances into the traditional realm

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50 Yoshida, *Perusha*, p. 189.

51 Nakaoka, “The Mission”, p. 230.

of the Persian empire to indicate that both powers are gaining ground in Central Asia. For Yoshida, Britain played a game in the Near East as it always stood by Persia in territorial and political conflicts with the neighboring Ottoman empire. British tactics “served to generate antagonism between them from establishing a special relationship based on their common Islamic religion” which is again a novel interpretation on the part of Yoshida about the historic sectarian divide between the Sunna and Shia that emerged ever since the Ottoman-Iranian War in the seventeenth century. For Yoshida, imperialist interests in this region had prevented the two traditional empires from solidarity. But the fight over the territories of the Ottoman and Qajar polities also provided great opportunities for Britain and Russia in their rivalry with each other.<sup>52</sup>

Yoshida also has an opinion on the connections between imperialism and ethnic politics. He had witnessed the Kurdish rebellion in July and August of 1880, that had erupted against high Persian taxation when they were in the Gulf area. He concluded that it had been British induced. For Yoshida, the large Kurdish population who inhabited the frontier between the Ottoman and Qajar realms were Great Britain’s bulwark. Supporting the cause of Shaykh Abdullah, the Amir of the region, the British Minister in Tehran personally had praised to Yoshida the qualities of the Kurds compared to the Persian government. But the Russians who moved closer to the Qajar monarchy in recent years, had supported the Persian government in suppressing the Kurdish rebellion.<sup>53</sup>

Yoshida explains that Central Asia too was the prancing ground for British and Russian rivalry. The British moved into the Herat region in Afghanistan, which the Persian government claimed. While cooperating with Persia against Russian advances into the Merv area, Britain also supported the local powerful warlord Abdulrahman Khan in Afganistan, as a bulwark against Russian penetration.<sup>54</sup>

Yoshida saw the recent demotion of the Western-educated anglophile Foreign Minister and the mysterious death of Hosein, who had been their initial contact, as a reflection of the shift in the Shah’s government toward

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52 Nakaoka, “The Mission”, p. 224.

53 Nakaoka, “The Mission”, p. 224.

54 Nakaoka, “The Mission”, p. 225.

Russia, to counter British hegemony. Yoshida has a “Persian Gentleman” explain that the former Foreign Minister Hosein had secretly kept in touch with Great Britain and had tried to introduce progressive reforms. But the present-day conservative circles who had him ousted were under the shelter of the Russians. Yoshida also considered the Shah to be an important leader who would have been successful had his senior officials not been so uncooperative. But he was an autocrat. Having visited Europe after the French Revolution, the Shah was seriously disturbed by the recent rise in French type Republican ideas and tried to protect his wealth and honor through despotic oppression. From the account of Yoshida, one can surmise that the Persian Gentleman is Mirza Ali Atabak, the excellent English-speaking translator who had been educated in Malta, and had accompanied the Yoshida Mission throughout their journey.<sup>55</sup>

Nakaoka notes that Yoshida sensed a “latent danger” in the great enthusiasm of the Shah for opening trade relations with Japan. His conclusion was that there was no urgency in opening trade or expanding relations with Persia that might embroil Japan in such a troublesome spot of British and Russian rivalry. Therefore, Yoshida’s conclusion was political, rather than economic, in the end.

### **Assessment**

Still, although the Yoshida team found it difficult to “penetrate” into the alien world that, for them, was not like the civilized West, they were amazed at the great alien cultural world. Sprinkled with images of great beauty and austere monuments unfolding in front of them as they travelled along the ancient Silk Road into the hinterland of the Persian empire, subsequently followed by their comparatively brief sojourn in Ottoman Istanbul, Yoshida duly described this as the most beautiful construction of the Creator.<sup>56</sup> The long expedition formed the basis of their general impressions of the Muslim world as a combination of the amazing, beautiful, and ancient sites with a complex cultural mix that this mission appears to have not been prepared to penetrate. The months’ long experience of the Mission participants in the region, and their official status, which enabled

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<sup>55</sup> Nakaoka, “The Mission”, pp. 223-224.

<sup>56</sup> Yoshida, *Perusha*, pp. 1-2.

direct access to the rulers and bureaucrats in both governments. provided firsthand information between these two so-called “Non-Western” polities in Asia. Both were dealing with the common hegemonic influence of the Western world in their own pattern, though the Japanese surfaced as having made more strides in adopting Western forms and notions of power.

The Yoshida Mission also says something about the Tokugawa legacy of foreign relations in modern Japan as well. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs chose to make the Mission’s entry into the Middle East through Iran, which is geographically the closest part of the Muslim Middle East to Japan. The point of entry into Iran was chosen to be the Basra region using Bushehr port in the Persian Gulf, which was the gate to the Silk Road route, leading to Tehran, the capital of Persia. The Japanese appear to have acted in line with the Tokugawa understanding of Muslim geography that derived from their centuries-old interaction with Holland, which had ascribed importance to Basra as the main depot of the Dutch East India Company. Members of the Mission had read accounts of Persia in the famous book of the Tokugawa age, *Seiyō Kibun* (Records of Things Heard from the West) from 1715, written by Arai Hakuseki, the advisor of the Shogun in foreign affairs. The central location of Iran on the traditional trans-Asian commercial route to Europe in the Tokugawa map of the world was the legacy which had initiated the Japanese economic interest. The Dutch had always sold Japanese Arita-yaki porcelain to Iran and the Yoshida Mission Japanese merchants had followed in Dutch footsteps to bring such wares themselves.

### **The Global Aftermath**

The Yoshida Mission to the Muslim Hemispheres began official contacts between the Meiji government and the Muslim polities of the region and initiated the Meiji Japanese into an unknown civilization. The Meiji Japanese had become accustomed to looking at the contemporary world through the lenses of the West and had accepted in large measure its self-image as the world of progress and enlightenment. Keeping the West as the benchmark of modern civilization, Yoshida gazed with a jaundiced eye at this micro-level encounter with Western presence in the Middle

East and Central Asia as *the fight of tigers and dragons*. He also critically judged Iran according to the standards of Western modernity. The opinions of the Yoshida Mission portray a mixture of Western Orientalist assumptions with some original observations, serving as an instructive and picturesque journey into the Japanese perception of the nineteenth century world. The Mission confirmed Fukuzawa Yūkichi's opinion that Qajar Persia and Ottoman Turkey, though sovereign powers that were also reforming through the adoption of Western civilization, were troublesome spots and not quite in the center of modern civilization. Contemporary scholarship today agrees with the consensus that the Yoshida Mission was instrumental in the formation of the mainstream Japanese perspectives which included much of the prejudices about the Islamic world as backward and not part of the modern world.

Significantly, the actual impetus to open relations had initially come from the Iranian side, which was interested in expanding trade and friendly relations with young Japan, perhaps to gain some space to maneuver globally from the relentless pressures of Russia and Britain. Yet the Yoshida Mission had concluded that the political rivalry between Britain and Russia and probably the very recent leaning of the Shah toward Russia made this venture into "globalization" unwise. The Shah too, in the end, had kept his ardor for Japan vague enough to ascertain Japan's real intentions.

In hindsight, however, Yoshida's visit suggests the roots of the importance that Iran carries in Japan's foreign policy today toward the Middle East and Central Asia. Yoshida noted that Persia, today's Iran, occupies a point of strategic importance in a region where there is strong rivalry among the outside major powers especially between Great Britain and Russia.<sup>57</sup>

At the moment, Yoshida and Furukawa's verdict was negative in terms of the difficulties in penetrating the Persian market, but in time the global trade links would work favorably.

As for the Persian record of the visit, the court historian Mohammad Hasan Khan, the *Etamad al Saltaneh*, the trusted servant of the court, wrote in elegant Persian prose the Yoshida visit in an entry of his history of the

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<sup>57</sup> Nakaoka, "The Mission", p. 223.

era. For Mohammed Hasan Khan “The government of Japan, one of the Oriental states which is located in Asia dispatched the Mission... in order to request the opening of communications as well as to establish a friendship with the Persian government”. The historical record narrated that “The government officials of Bushehr welcomed them in a suitable, respectful manner... the officials (in Shiraz) performed a ceremony in honor of the special envoy and fellow travelers”. We find out that they were lodged in the Bagh-e Il-Khani, (The Ilhanid Garden Palace) one of the blessed Imperial Palaces, under the complete care of the government officials. Unlike Yoshida, the whole tone is a very positive, respectful notation of this visit.<sup>58</sup>

Although Iran and Japan did not, in the end, sign a treaty even though the Minister of Commerce and Mirza Ali and the Shah himself appear to have been quite enthusiastic, this investigative visit set the stage for contacts in the future. Most importantly, the Yoshida Mission began the Iranian intellectual engagement with Japan’s Constitutional modernity as a model for Iran. The Iranian Constitutional Revolution in 1906, the first Constitutional monarchy in the region after the 1876 Ottoman Constitution had been “shelved” by Abdulhamid in the neighboring Ottoman Empire, (both were based on the Belgian Constitution), took the Japanese Constitution as an inspiration. Later the former Prime Minister of Iran, Atabak Azam Amin al-Saltaneh (1858-1907) visited Japan in 1903 after his resignation from the office with Mehdiqoli Hedayat (1864-1955) during their world tour. An eminent writer and historian, Hedayat continued a prominent political career and held important posts in the Iranian government including the Prime Ministry (1927-32) during the reign of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi Shah.<sup>59</sup> They stayed in Japan close to a month and met with important Japanese leaders such as Katsura Tarō Itō Hirobumi, Ōkuma Shigenobu, and Komura Jūtarō. The Iranian visitors were treated as official dignitaries. Hedayat, who was educated in Germany, wrote an account of their trip *Safarname ye Makkeh* (Book of Travels to Mecca) which actually was mostly about China and Japan, and that discussed at length

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58 Nakaoka, “The Mission”, p. 221; Sugita, “The First Contact”, pp. 27-28.

59 Sugita, “The First Contact”, p. 24.

the modern reforms of the late Meiji era through his observations of Japanese society. Like many of the Muslim writings on Japan at the time, the account idealized Japan as the epitome of modernity.

The trip profoundly affected the world view of the two Persian political figures. Hedayat later on is said to have shaped the first Parliament of Iran inaugurated in 1906 with the example of the Japanese Diet in mind. Hedayat wrote in his memoirs that Atabak's interviews with Japan's Prime Minister Katsura Tarō and Marquis Itō Hirobumi had changed him. Without any doubt, Atabak after the trip was not "what he used to be before in his politics".<sup>60</sup>

The story of the Yoshida expedition also tells us something about the global public relations network. In this case, progressive Muslim Iranians were aptly used by the Japanese authorities to make sure that the message of Japan as a friend of Iran got through to the general public via their contacts with Iranians in Istanbul. The Persian language Journal *Akhtar*, a newspaper published by an Iranian merchant in Istanbul between 1880-1896 that was widely read by Persian speakers in the Ottoman territories, Iran, India, Egypt, and Europe, and a major outlet for progressive and modernist ideas, started to publish many articles on Japanese reforms of education including the translation of the Meiji education edict of 1872, military, the press, world fairs, industry and many other topics.<sup>61</sup>

On March 23, 1881, the newspaper published a report of the Yoshida Mission, whose members had briefly stopped in Istanbul on their way back to Japan from the official visit to Iran. The newspaper presented an Asianist vision for the future progress of all Asian peoples including Iranians if only Asian peoples would rise to action and zeal from their inertia. The report gave the example of the Japanese who showed zeal to learn as much as possible from the West, whereas the Ottomans and the Persians had been reluctant. The article begins with an impassionate appeal for Asian unity and advises the Asian countries to conclude "treaties of peace

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60 Sugita, "The First Contact", p. 24, p. 26, p. 31 for Japanese Diet and modernization comparison, p. 26 for quotation.

61 Anja Pistor-Hatam, "Progress and Civilization in Nineteenth-Century Japan: The Far Eastern State as a Model for Modernization" *Iranian Studies*, Volume 29, Numbers 1-2, (Winter-Spring 1996): 111-126.



and friendship which will unite them against European "lions".<sup>62</sup> The author of this report warned readers to beware of allowing the Europeans to control modern transportation, and this appears to allude to the political crisis in Iran over the Reuteur concession and which also contextualizes Shah Nasreddin's pointed questions to Yoshida about whether the Japanese railroads are built by the government.

The question of the Japanese as a "heathen" people was diplomatically circumvented at the end of the report by the secular vision: "Our last obligation is to approve of all requests for sincerity and to unite the foundations for happiness, progress, and peace in the whole of Asia, so that there will be no incompatibility based on religious affiliation..."<sup>63</sup>

Whether the Japanese "report" in question was directly based on Yoshida's report as the paper claimed is not clear. Yoshida's report on Iran to Tokyo certainly did not contain such avid advocacy of Asianist aims, but this was the propaganda image that he and the members of the Mission chose to impart to the Iranian public through the *Akhtar*. The journal was going to be quite influential behind the tobacco boycott of the Teheran on the eve of the 1906 Constitutional Revolution. The report probably relied on notes given by Yoshida, Yokoyama, or Furukawa, the three members of the Mission who had taken time out to contact the Iranians living in Istanbul. The Iranian editor may have also made use of the conversation of the Yoshida group to support his own opinions. The Asianist orientation of the article was quite novel for the time. Neither merely anti-Western nor simply pro-Western, it combined Westernism and anti-imperialism into a single real-politic pragmatic vision. The article noted two major ideas: first; "the importance of learning from the West and using the experiences of others", and second; "the importance of guarding against Western dominance".<sup>64</sup>

Iran and Japan still had to wait until the late twenties and particularly the thirties when Japanese business activities in the Middle East established mostly for importing oil and exporting textiles and other inexpensive goods that competed with British domination in the local markets.

62 Anja, "Progress", pp. 121-122.

63 Anja, "Progress", p. 124.

64 Anja, "Progress", p. 126.

The trade surge also provided the economic background for the strong Japanese interest to be much more active in the region and in Islamic affairs. Both countries instituted formal diplomatic relations in 1926 under Riza Shah Pahlavi who had just toppled the Qajar and established his dynasty. Known as one of the autocratic modernizers of the era, the Pahlavi government signed a Treaty of Amity with Japan in 1939 and, until the Russian and British occupation of the country during the Second World War, he appears to have courted German and Japanese relations.<sup>65</sup>

As for Yoshida, he went on to accompany Prince Itō Hirobumi on his journey to Europe to prepare the Meiji Constitution that was promulgated in 1889. His previous visit to Persia must have matured his opinion of the West as a modern civilization, which simultaneously was the “fight between the dragon and the tiger” that threatened the Far East. Yamanaoka suspects that Yoshida’s Persian experience probably affected Yoshida’s vision of how Japan should take its place in the modern world. The journey to the Persian Gulf and the Persian Muslim world had revealed the underside of the modern West with disturbing instances of racism and imperialistic ambition. For Yoshida, Great Powers’ ambitions made the prospects for reform ever more difficult for the troubled sovereign autocracies in the Muslim world which were squeezed between perennial Western pressure and domestic demand for participation in politics. The trip to Persia had become the source of information about British activities and Russia’s advance toward the East. It showed the difficulties of autocratic governments that tried to reform their countries without functioning constitutions.<sup>66</sup> But some of the intellectuals who encountered Yoshida were to accomplish the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906 with popular support that paved the way for the global moment of Revolutions – the 1908 Young Turk Revolution in the Ottoman empire and the 1911 Chinese Revolution that toppled the Qing dynasty.<sup>67</sup>

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65 Hashem Rajabzadeh, “Modernization of Iran and the Example of Japan: Images and Ideals” *Osaka Gaikokugō Daigaku Gakuhō* 76, no. 3 (1988): 47 in Sugita p. 31.

66 Yamanaoka, *Meiji Nihonjin*, p. 122.; Nakaoka, “The Mission”, p. 221; Sugita, “The First Contact”, pp. 27-28.

67 See special Issue on Constitutional Revolutions in Iran, Ottoman Turkey, Russia, Japan. *Divan*, Volume 13 No. 24 and 25 (2008-1, 2008-2) issues.