

### **The Yellow Peril in War, Economics, and Popular Culture**

Militarizing Japan: Patriotism, Profit, and Children's Print Media, 1894-1925

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<http://www.japanfocus.org/-owen-griffiths/2528>

September 22, 2007.

Jack London: The Adventurer-Writer who Chronicled Asian Wars, Confronted Racism—and Saw the Future

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January 25, 2010

'Japan, Britain and the Yellow Peril in Africa in the 1930s

Richard Bradshaw and Jim Ransdell

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October 31, 2011.

These three articles provide insight into the different conditions under which yellow peril and white peril fears were invoked. My article argues that Japanese stories of real and imagined war written for children revealed adult fears of a Social Darwinist world in which only the strong survive through an intensely gendered combination of martial glory and manly sacrifice. The commercial success of these stories, beginning at the time of the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-5), also demonstrates how war and patriotism could be turned to profitable advantage for mass media. An important component of this formula was to contrast Japanese heroism with the treachery, cowardice, or incompetence of the enemy. The Americans, British, and Russians were cast as a "white peril," duplicitous predators who, if not stopped, would devour the Japanese homeland. The Chinese, on the other hand, were depicted in a Japanese style "yellow peril," as bumbling fools, devoid of national pride whose inability to govern themselves was a threat to Japan's own national security. These stories contained all of the tropes and rhetorical devices of yellow and white peril that would be deployed in Japan's later all-out wars with China and the West. In this, the Japanese were not unique. They drew from the same deep well of racial imagery as did their enemies, real and imagined.

Métraux's article asks us to reconsider the work of Jack London, one of American's greatest modern writers. Rather than see him as a mouthpiece for yellow peril fears as many have done, Métraux suggests that London may have been the opposite, a realist who saw a predatory world driven by war and a rare internal critic of an arrogant West, blind to its own role in creating the dangers it sought to eradicate. Through London's fiction and non-fiction we can see the ease with which yellow and white peril fears could move people to action in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. His work also reminds us of the power of ideas themselves and the important role media of all types play as purveyors of those ideas.

In yet another take on the yellow peril, Bradshaw and Ransdell analyze how economic conflict could be articulated in terms of race. Specifically, they examine

the rise of yellow peril fears in South Africa, Britain, and Italy due to Japan's growing economic presence in Africa. South Africans feared that cheap Japanese textile imports would undercut and ultimately destabilize the South African economy. Along with these fears were parallel concerns that Japanese immigrants might be admitted together with their products. These fears grew increasingly strident after the Great Depression in 1929, which further reveals the all too human tendency of seizing on a scapegoat in times of perceived crisis. Japanese industry was also increasing its economic presence in Ethiopia in the 1930s, bringing it into conflict with Italy at the very moment Italy sought to expand its colonial empire in East Africa. After war broke out between Italy and Ethiopia in 1935, however, the Japanese government decided that global political concerns trumped economic interests. Despite immense popular Japanese support for Ethiopia, Japan's leaders ultimately chose to recognize Italy's annexation of Ethiopia in return for Italy's recognition of Manchukuo.