Narrating the new Japan: Biograph’s
*The Hero of Liao-Yang* (1904)

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*The Hero of Liao-Yang*, produced by the Biograph Company in 1904, stands as one of the earliest precursors of a production cycle that the *Moving Picture World* in 1910 would label the ‘Japanese invasion’, referring to a number of motion pictures that satisfy the fascination of the ‘occidental mind’ with things Japanese or tap the ‘connection, sentimental or otherwise, between the United States and Japan.’

However, rather than *The Hero of Liao-Yang*’s place in the broader strain of cinematic Japanophilia, it is this film’s more immediate historical context that concerns me in this essay. When it was released in September 1904, this two-reel rendering of an episode from the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5) was as unmistakably topical as a daily newspaper’s political cartoon, a public affairs lecture on the Lyceum circuit or a war correspondent’s dispatch from the front. It is not surprising that Biograph found the Russo-Japanese War to be a marketable and readily filmable subject for a narrative two-reeler, for the early twentieth century (also the era of *Madame Butterfly* – in the form of the 1898 Long novella, 1900 Belasco play and 1905 Puccini opera) was as preoccupied with Japanese masculinity as the World War II years and the yen-never-sets 1980s.

Although the Russo-Japanese War could be said to have ushered in the twentieth century, it no longer has the symbolic resonance, much less the timely relevance, it once did, when the strategic manoeuvres and deployment of modern weaponry by Russia and especially Japan were much debated in the American and European popular press and poured over by professional military observers. Yet this war remains a remarkably rich (and largely ignored) historical site for exploring the politics of cross-cultural representation and the tangled skein of...
discourses in America concerning militarism, modernization and race. In this essay, I will examine how these discourses were instantiated and inflected through the particularities of *The Hero of Liao-Yang*, whose representation of Japanese masculinity is best understood against the backdrop of contemporary American accounts of what was then frequently referred to as the ‘New Japan’.

The larger question posed by *The Hero of Liao-Yang* is: what stood for ‘Japan’ and ‘Japaneseness’ at the beginning of the twentieth century in the USA? More precisely, what avatar of the Japanese hero and what variety of heroic action was imaginable? How was Japan’s participation in this decidedly modern war represented? By sampling a wide range of material circulating through several different media and cultural channels in the USA, including editorial cartoons and photojournalism as well as juvenile fiction and first-person accounts by renowned war correspondents, I will situate *The Hero of Liao-Yang* within a contemporary array of equally topical representations and thereby suggest how film historians might broaden the field of what we take into account when we talk about cross-cultural representation in early twentieth-century America. Of course, this foray into cultural history will inevitably be partial and beholden to the holdings of public and private archives, including the relics and junk that recirculate through eBay. Topicality is elusive and conjectural, but it cannot be ignored, especially when it comes to films designed for the commercial marketplace, where the topical is a significant attraction, a source of pleasure and a reminder of the ties that link the screen to the discourses that circulate in and comprise the public sphere.

According to acclaimed US war correspondent and novelist, Frederick Palmer, ‘there never was a war at all comparable’ to the Russo-Japanese War and ‘never a war which drew so many foreign correspondents’. In addition to Palmer’s *With Kuroki in Manchuria*, 1904–5 also saw the publication of books in English by correspondents like Frederic William Unger (*Russia and Japan and a Complete History of the War in the Far East* [1904]) and Richard Barry (*Port Arthur: A Monster Heroism* [1905]), as well as a first-person account by best-selling Kentucky author, John Fox Jr (*Following the Sun-Flag: A Vain Pursuit through Manchuria* [1905]). Not all of these commentators agreed with Palmer, who claimed that the Russo-Japanese War was ‘the most picturesque of modern wars’. Indeed, contemporary correspondents like novelist Jack London (who reported on the war for the *San Francisco Examiner*) frequently bemoaned the practical difficulties of viewing and visually rendering this conflict because of inclement weather, red tape, state censorship and what Paul Virilio would later call the ‘growing derealization of military engagement’. For example, Fox, a self-professed Japanophile, undertook the journey east fired by the prospect of witnessing (and then ‘telling tales’ of) the Japanese soldier’s ‘heroism, chivalry, devotion, sacrifice, incomparable patriotism; to see him fighting, wounded — and, since such things in war must be — dying, dead’.

In the end, however, the best view Fox was allowed access to only revealed
soundless puffs of smoke ten miles in the distance, caused by ‘shells [that] were so far away that we could not tell whether they were Russian or Japanese, whether they were coming toward us or going away’. 7

Even a much closer vantage point on the action could prove to be no less disappointing. After witnessing the Battle of Yalu from a safe spot that afforded him a privileged overview, Palmer confessed:

Less than three hours had been occupied in a business which you had seen as a whole with panoramic fidelity . . . You wanted the charge made over again, and made slower to give you more time for appreciation. You had seen the reality, and at the same time you felt a detachment from it which was at once uncanny and unsportsmanlike. The spectator had been as safe as in an orchestra chair when carnage reigns on the stage. It was as if a battle had been arranged for him and he had been taken to the best position for seeing its theatrical effects. 8

Palmer’s anxiety at occupying this prized position is here mixed with his somewhat guilty recognition that war’s reality might register as merely another display of artfully arranged stage carnage. Interestingly, Palmer is equally dissatisfied with his first-hand temporal experience of war. To desire that the battle be ‘made over again and made slower to give you more time for appreciation’ is to dream, probably unwittingly, of a slow-motion cinematic (and aestheticized?) rendering of the combat experience.

Yet notwithstanding the complaints and misgivings of war correspondents, the Russo-Japanese War was exhaustively documented and highlighted as a top news story, a subject for illustration-filled Sunday supplement sections and a prime topic on the editorial pages of the American press, both in major metropolitan markets and far off in the provinces (see figure 1). 9 Like newspapers, general-interest magazines such as Collier’s and Harper’s Weekly also privileged first-hand reportage and relied heavily on visual information: photos, maps, drawings, caricatures and cartoons, all of which quite literally made the conflict ‘picturesque’. These images, in turn, frequently reappeared in other venues, including lectures and various chronologically arranged illustrated histories of the Russo-Japanese War, like Richard Linthicum and Trumbell White’s War between Japan and Russia (1904).
At the same time, this war – and especially the Japanese side – became the subject of hundreds of different three-dimensional stereoview cards, sold in sets for home use and frequently printed in colour (figure 2). When mounted in a hand-held or tabletop viewing apparatus, the stereoview card typically offers the illusion of a tableau in depth with several receding visual planes, all arrayed before an ideal vantage point. (Two-dimensional photographic versions of stereoview images also circulated in other media, reappearing as postcards, glass stereopticon slides and magazine illustrations.) Russo-Japanese War stereoviews produced by T.W. Ingersoll, Underwood & Underwood and other firms depict troop movements, artillery, camp life, embattled terrain and details of local colour, like Koreans in native costumes, Manchurian peasants at work and architectural sites.

A quite different and perhaps even more ubiquitous medium for imaging the Russo-Japanese War was the editorial cartoon – irreverent, eye-catching and ‘exaggerated’ almost by definition. Cartoonists under
the pressure of daily deadlines caricatured Japan as earnest Lilliputian or feisty tyke, aggressive dog or well-trained combatant, but editorial cartoons also regularly provided a running commentary on how the Russo-Japanese War was represented, circulated, exhibited and perceived in the USA. The warring nations might, for instance, be pictured as little more than a momentary diversion for a ‘global’ audience, another act in the ongoing performance of geopolitics, as in a Des Moines [Iowa] Register cartoon from November 1903, which renders Japan and Russia as vaudeville performers ready to start a ‘knockabout’ song-and-dance routine, while the world in the shape of an impatient globe looks on (figure 3).

For my purposes, the most interesting of such commentaries is a syndicated cartoon originally run in the Cleveland Leader in April 1905, fifteen months into the Russo-Japanese War (figure 4). As is frequently the case, in this cartoon, the conflict in Asia is being enacted for an audience that includes the US and the European powers. In this instance, however, the Russo-Japanese War is figured not as a vaudeville turn, circus act or boxing match, but as a moving picture show, for the caption reads: ‘Turn on the Biograph.’ ‘Biograph’ here probably serves as a synonym for ‘moving picture machine,’ although, in fact, the Biograph Company had by this date released two Russo-Japanese War films, including what might have been its first two-reel narrative motion picture, the fifteen-minute, fifteen-shot production, The Hero of Liao-Yang. It is not clear in the cartoon whether Japan and Russia are waiting for the Biograph camera to roll before the battle begins or the Euro-

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10 Thus the Cleveland Leader could write on 25 December 1904: ‘the war in the far East has been prolific of biograph pictures showing the evolution of troops and flotilla’ (p. 19).


The Battle of Liao-Yang, a key encounter midway through the Russo-Japanese War, took place from 24 August to 3 September 1904. Contemporary commentators struggled for superlatives to express the magnitude and human costs of this battle. For Americans, the Civil War came to mind. ‘No fighting so fierce, so sustained, and so bloody has been experienced since the armies of Grant and Lee met in their great death grapple in the Wilderness in the Civil War’, declared Sidney Tyler in The Japan-Russia War.11 Less than three weeks after the battle, Biograph had completed The Hero of Liao-Yang. It was hardly a surprising choice of subject. Biograph’s fiction films of the period frequently make use of highly topical material set in distinctive locales, like The Moonshiner and The Suburbanite (both also 1904) or, more germane, The Nihilists (February 1905), which was billed as a ‘stirring dramatic production based on the internal troubles of Russia’.

Biograph was hardly unique in exploiting the appeal of war films. As might be expected after the successful cinematic showcasing of the Spanish-American War, the Boxer uprising and the Boer War, producers and exhibitors found the Russo-Japanese War to be prime moving picture material.13 Pathé, for instance, offered Around Port Arthur and the four-part Russian-Japanese War, and the Edison Company filmed its naval drama, the Battle of Chemulpo Bay (April 1904), using miniatures in its New York studio. Soon after Biograph released The Battle of the Yalu (April 1904), a re-enactment in four scenes, filmed at St John’s Military Academy in Syracuse, New York, Edison followed with its version, entitled Skirmish between Russian and Japanese Advance Troops.

Donald Richie and Joseph Anderson note that Japanese-produced footage of the Russo-Japanese War was screened at several sites in the USA in 1904, including the St Louis International Exposition.15 However, the most elaborate American exhibitions of Russo-Japanese War films were mounted by popular lecturer Burton Holmes and by Lyman T. Howe’s travelling moving picture shows in 1904–6. Thanks to Charles Musser’s exhaustive research, we know that Howe’s program on the siege and fall of Port Arthur included 18 different scenes shown in

American spectators are waiting for the Biograph projector to fill the screen with its images: is this a matter of war on film or war for film? Either way, it is remarkable to find as early as 1905 — barely a decade into motion picture history — so direct an acknowledgement that modern war requires the apparatus of cinema. In the following sections I will analyse what appeared on screen when the exceedingly up-to-the-minute Biograph was turned on, joining war correspondents, cartoonists and photographers in the process of making visible and narrativizing the Russo-Japanese War. More broadly, I will annotate The Hero of Liao-Yang, that is, attempt to account for its choices and situate it within the early twentieth-century American discourse that concerned masculinity, militarism and the New Japan.
roughly chronological order, from the departure of a Japanese regiment in Tokyo to the Russian surrender of Port Arthur – all complete with what a reviewer for the *Milwaukee Sentinel* described as extensive live sound accompaniment: ‘the clanging of sabers, the rattle of musketry, the fanfare of trumpets, the roll of the drum, the booming of cannon’.

Howe’s war pictures, wrote this enthusiastic reviewer, ‘can not but make the heart of every man swell with pride and admiration’ as he sees ‘the daredevil bravery of the little Japs, who surmounted inconceivable obstacles that led to the attainment of an object and purpose staked out by Japanese statesmanship decades ago’.

As was the case with the short films Lyman Howe strung together for his program, the contemporary reception of *The Hero of Liao-Yang* depended to a great extent on the specific conditions of exhibition at each engagement (see figure 5): was this Biograph two-reeler screened, for example, as part of a twenty-minute programme on a vaudeville bill or as

Figure 5

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one segment in a forty-five-minute moving picture show at a church or outdoor park? Was it combined with magic lantern slides to create an educational program? Was it introduced and explicated by a live lecturer? Was it fleshed out by live sound effects? What particular type of live or mechanical musical accompaniment was performed at the screening? (For instance, one likely possibility would have been the combination or alternation of what passed for ‘Oriental’ or ‘Japanese’ music and martial music/sound effects.) Each different configuration of these variables – programming, venue and sound accompaniment – would result in a significantly different viewing experience of The Hero of Liao-Yang. That is also not to mention how this experience might have been affected by the behaviour and demographics of the audience for any particular screening. If this film seen today seems truncated, discontinuous or bafflingly incoherent, this is in part because The Hero of Liao-Yang was only fully realized and ‘completed’ (narratively as well as politically and ideologically) at the site of exhibition rather than the site of production.

The print of The Hero of Liao-Yang preserved in the Library of Congress paper-print collection contains fifteen shots: the longest is the final shot of the film (2:27 minutes), and the briefest shows a young man waving a sword (ten seconds). Unlike certain other Biograph films of this period, this print of The Hero of Liao-Yang includes no intertitles. The first eight shots (totalling about 5:30 minutes) comprise what I will call the home front. They are set in the quite spacious, fenced-in grounds of an estate, which includes an open-air veranda (intended to represent a tea house), a decorative pond and a small shrine. The home front shots are temporally as well as spatially continuous, although several of them (nos 1, 2, 3 and 5) could stand alone as independent vignettes:

1. A group of people (male and female, including a younger boy) all dressed in kimono (except one male dressed in a blazer, white slacks and tie) watch as one of the men is blindfolded, then all play blind man’s bluff.
2. The group watches and applauds as two of the males practice kendo (figure 6).
3. On the veranda of the tea house, the group drink tea and sake.
4. A soldier arrives at the gate, delivers a letter to a man in kimono, bows, then leaves.
5. In the now-empty garden, a young man practices sword waving.
6. As the young man continues waving the sword, the hero emerges in uniform, sits on the edge of the teahouse and is handed the sword by the young man; then he is formally presented with a samurai sword by a woman in kimono. He holds it aloft and bows, then returns it to the woman.
7. The hero visits a small shrine where he washes his hands, claps and bows before the shrine, then exits the frame.
8. The hero re-enters the area near the tea house, moves with the woman and the younger male to the gate for a formal farewell (with bows), before he departs as they watch.

The final seven shots (totalling about 9:15 minutes) recount the hero’s adventures during what we assume is the battle of Liao-Yang:

9. Amid activity at a Japanese command tent, the hero arrives and is given a written message, then departs on horseback.
10. In the field, three Japanese soldiers decamp; the hero arrives, leaves his sword and horse, then departs on foot.
11. Russian soldiers hiding in the brush surprise the hero as he approaches from the distance; after a struggle with the four Russians soldiers, he escapes; they pursue.
12. Exchanging gunfire with the Russians, the hero shoots one of his pursuers before he apparently is shot and stumbles to the ground; he shoots another of his pursuers and puts the message in his mouth before the Russians reach him; they search his clothes and boots.
13. At a medical tent with a Red Cross insignia, guarded by a Russian soldier, the hero on a stretcher speaks with a pigtailed man, who then dashes away; the hero is examined by a nurse and a doctor and is carried off on a stretcher by orderlies; the doctor checks another patient.
14. The hero is placed in a shallow grave, and the pigtailed man covers the hero’s face with a cloth before he is buried by the orderlies; when the Russians have gone, the helper unearths the still-living hero, retrieves his uniform, props him up, and assists him in getting dressed; the hero staggers off alone.
15. At a Japanese battlefield command centre, officers congregate, messengers arrive on horseback and artillery is fired; finally, the wounded hero staggers in from the distance and delivers his message; he exits the frame as the artillery barrage continues while the officers gesture and scan the distance with binoculars (figure 7).

Certain aspects of *The Hero of Liao-Yang* are typical of the era. The temporal and spatial coordinates of the action are sometimes not entirely
clear: we do not know, for example, how much time passes between the 
ambush and the rescue of the hero, and there is no attempt to link the 
various battlefield scenes so as to map out a coherent space. The staging 
of the action and the static, distanced positioning of the camera 
sometimes make it very difficult even to locate the hero within the frame. 
Narrative information is not consistently privileged, and the temporal 
rhythm as scene is connected to scene does not follow the dramatic logic 
we might expect, particularly in the film’s long final shot where the 
spectacle of the artillery barrage has much more weight than the 
wounded hero’s successful completion of his mission.

To complicate matters somewhat further, there is another, more 
narratively coherent, Biograph version of *The Hero of Liao-Yang*, in the 
form of a written synopsis of the film published in the company’s 
advertising catalogue:

A young Japanese officer interrupted from the quiet pleasures of his 
home life by official notice to join his regiment at once, swears fealty 
to his Emperor on the sword of his ancestor, and in a characteristically 
unemotional way bids farewell to his wife and children. The following 
scenes find him at the front, where he is intrusted with a deed of 
desperate daring – the carrying of a message through the enemy’s 
country to the commander of the second Japanese army. In the 
accomplishment of this feat he is severely wounded and captured by 
Cossacks, but, though seriously wounded, manages to devour the 
paper upon which the despatch is written. He is taken to a Russian field 
hospital, and there, by feigning death and with the assistance of a 
faithful Chinese coolie, escapes and arrives at the headquarters of the 
second army while the ‘Battle of Liao-Yang’ is raging. In the midst of 
terrific cannonading and shells bursting about in every direction, he 
hands his despatch to the officer commanding and is decorated upon 
the field with the emblem of highest honor in Japan, taken from the 
breast of the general himself.\(^{17}\)

This synopsis explains the business with the sword in shot 6 and clarifies 
the role of the hero in shot 13, where he is said to ‘feign’ death and thus 
definitely is in on the escape plot, perhaps even directing the subterfuge 
undertaken by the character here identified as the ‘faithful Chinese 
coolie’. The synopsis also suggests that perhaps a shot (or a final 
intertitle) in the print of *The Hero of Liao-Yang* is missing, since we do 
not clearly see the hero actually being decorated. At the same time, 
Biograph’s written account foregrounds (and creates) a sense of the 
film’s narrative coherence by underemphasizing shots 1, 2, 3 and 5 – 
tableaux that apparently illustrate the ‘quiet [and not so quiet] pleasures’ 
of Japanese home life.

In fact, the kendo match and sword waving display in these shots are 
quite in keeping with a non-narrative category of motion pictures that 
Biograph produced under the rubric of ‘Views of Sports and Pastimes’. 
This part of this company’s output included a series on ‘primitive sports
of the Indian’ (wrestling, tug-of-war, horse races and so on) and such titles as *Japanese Fencing* and *Jiu-Jitsu, Japanese Art of Self-Defense*. The apparently eclectic inclusiveness of *The Hero of Liao-Yang* could therefore be explained as an attempt to incorporate the range of attractions offered by several different early cinema genres: ‘views of sports and pastimes’, scenics, battle re-enactments and military views – all inscribed within a highly topical narrative of heroism (and Japan) triumphant.

That Japan unquestionably stands as the heroic side in this war is a crucial given in *The Hero of Liao-Yang*, even though nothing in the title of the film suggests the nationality of the hero, who could conceivably have been an interloping American or a valiant Cossack. However, this partisan perspective is not at all surprising, considering US newspaper and magazine coverage of the Russo-Japanese War. Biograph’s Japanese hero may be nameless (and relatively faceless and featureless, which render his identity more a matter of his body than his physiognomy), but the first half of *The Hero of Liao-Yang* presents the hero as a man with something to leave behind, something to fight for: a place in the world, a culturally marked identity, a social position which allows for leisure activities, a home, a family, a past. Note that the ‘faithful Chinese coolie’ has none of these attributes of familial and class identity – attributes which demonstrate in this instance that the civilized nation of Japan merits American attention and respect.

Except for the game of blind man’s bluff, the varied activities inside the spacious fenced-in grounds – complete with garden, fountain, shrine and teahouse – all signify ‘Japanese-ness’ in one way or another (including the fact that this Japan has room for at least one person dressed in fashionable Western attire). This cultural/familial/national constellation of objects, gestures, actions and values is why the hero does not hesitate to go off to war (although his homeland itself faces no immediate threat). If only by the *post hoc* cinematic logic of scene following scene, his life at home qualifies him to be a hero. However, since there are no causal links between what happens in the first half and the second half of the film, the experience of the home front apparently does not foster any special skills that will avail the hero when he arrives at the combat zone. Sake does not save him, nor does bowing correctly, nor does acknowledging his ancestors, nor does kendo.

Given all the markers of Japanese-ness in the first half of the film, does anything identify the protagonist as Japanese in the second half? The hero of Liao-Yang is heroic because he leaves his home to fulfill his duty to the state and then manages to complete his mission, which is to hand-deliver a message that apparently has something to do with the booming artillery that fills the film’s final frame. He performs no great rescue, achieves no individual objective, undertakes no *bushido*-inspired self-sacrifice. He is trustworthy and resourceful, capable of undergoing great physical hardship, of rising from the grave to do his duty, even if that duty does not seem to have any immediate bearing on the battle of...
Liao-Yang. In the end it is the Japanese artillery fire – and the officer corps directing the fire – that asserts at least a cinematic/narrative victory. In The Hero of Liao-Yang, Russia has no comparable technology at its disposal – and no heroes, only soldiers and medical personnel who can be easily outwitted.

Produced and released in the midst of the Russo-Japanese War, The Hero of Liao-Yang is notable as much for what it assumes as for what it shows about Japan, Japanese masculinity, modern warfare and the imperialist contest for control of Korea and China. This film’s obvious topicality, its blending of independent attractions and continuous narrative, its fascination with the Japanese home front coupled with its celebration of Japanese prowess on the battlefield all point toward a broader, though hardly uniform, discursive terrain, around 1904. The Hero of Liao-Yang is best understood, I propose, as one strand in a web of representations and one episode in a rather complex story that the United States – from the sidelines, yet with a vested interest in the Pacific – told itself about Japan, Russia and modern warfare. The Russo-Japanese War fixed Japan, which was already undeniably an object of curiosity and desire, even more prominently and regularly under the gaze of Americans. For the rest of this essay, I will follow this gaze outward from The Hero of Liao-Yang to certain interrelated aspects of early twentieth-century discourse in the USA concerning armed and effective Japanese masculinity.

The resourceful hero who proves his mettle on the battlefield in Biograph’s 1904 film takes his place in a gallery of publicly circulated photographs, realistic drawings, stereoviews and caricatures of the Japanese soldier, including poignant illustrations of the soldier’s farewell
to beloved or family; informal snapshots of men in groups at ease near the front; portraits of heroically posed officers; photographs of troops deployed in military manoeuvres; graphic drawings of hand-to-hand combat and suicidal assaults; stark images of corpses and casualties; and editorial cartoons that render the soldier as diminutive belligerent or skeletal figure of death (figure 8). Encoding national, gender and racial identity, these images underscore the ubiquitous presence of the victorious (or soon-to-be victorious) Japanese soldier in the US mediascape, and in different ways they situate Japan in relation to a technologized modernity, position the Japanese soldier in the contested Asian terrain, and provide an Other to Japan in the form of Western war correspondents, Russian soldiers or civilians. These images enact, implicitly or explicitly, the cross-cultural distance between East and West (or, more specifically, between Japan and the USA), between brown/yellow/coloured masculinity and white masculinity. We might also say that each image of the Japanese soldier provides an answer to what increasingly became the crucial question posed by the Russo-Japanese War: how to account for Japan’s string of impressive victories? Or, in the more direct vernacular of an editorial cartoon from the Cleveland Leader: ‘Why the Japs Win’ (figure 9). Was it a matter of valiant fanaticism, modern military tactics, the assistance of the Chinese or the expertise of an experienced officer corps composed of latter-day samurai? This Cleveland Leader cartoon answers the question by showing the face of a young soldier, etched with words that name the
(essentially Japanese?) qualities that guarantee his nation’s victory: patriotism, strategy, skill, bravery, fatalism and determination.

These qualities similarly apply to Biograph’s hero of Liao-Yang, except perhaps for ‘fatalism’. Neither does The Hero of Liao-Yang foreground the ‘fanaticism’, which, according to correspondent Richard Barry, leads the Japanese soldier to ‘dash valiantly’ and unhesitatingly onto the ‘griddle of death’. ‘Fatalism’ (read as a willingness to face death) and ‘fanaticism’ (read as a sort of fervent fatalism, enacted on the battlefield) both figure in the discourse, often quite explicitly. Cameras were rarely, if ever, able to capture the close-quarters combat at Port Arthur or Liao-Yang, but illustrators filled the breach with action-filled tableaux showing hand-to-hand fighting, bayonet attacks and corpse-filled trenches, as in a drawing entitled, ‘In the Russian Trenches’, which shows a bearded, white-suited Russian being overwhelmed by a frenzied Japanese bayonet charge (figure 10). Such drawings frequently accompanied purportedly first-hand accounts, like this description from Sidney Tyler’s The Japan Russia War:

the struggle was carried on with an amount of fury to which there is no parallel in history. The Japanese dashed forward with the bayonet like madmen, and in serried columns, in which the shells made terrible furrows. Every time they reached the Russian lines horrible mêlées, in which even the wounded fought to the death, took place. No quarter was given. Pairs of corpses were found clinging to each other, the teeth of the men being buried in their adversaries’ throats and their fingers in their eyes as they had expired.

Such horrific charges could occur and, more important, could succeed, the argument ran, because of the Japanese Way of Death, which almost made the nation invincible and provided an explanation of sorts for the ‘madness’ Tyler describes. Along with accounts of frenzied assaults and selfless...
valour, there are also representations in books, newspapers and magazines of severely wounded or dead Japanese soldiers, littering the battlefield, being given medical attention or funeral rites. Such images testify not only to the cost of modern warfare and maybe even to a submerged Euro-American desire to see a rising Japan un-manned, but also to a belief that Japan’s victory comes from its ‘Oriental’ fatalism and what B.L. Putnam-Weale in *The Re-Shaping of the Far East* claimed to be ‘a calm disregard for death . . . a fixity of purpose and an unruffled patience that have seldom been equaled and certainly never surpassed in the entire course of the world’s history’.²² (*Madame Butterfly*, of course, provides a variation on the same theme.) While the bravery and ‘death’ of Biograph’s hero of Liao-Yang looks to be very much in keeping with a preoccupation of the larger discourse (i.e. Japanese heroes willingly face, even embrace, death), his actions suggest less fatalism than resourcefulness and purposefulness in accomplishing his mission. In the film it is enough that he is indirectly associated with bushido through the prominence of the sword in home front rituals and athletic displays. On the battlefield, he is not called upon literally or figuratively to commit state-sanctioned seppuku.

It is revealing in this context to contrast *The Hero of Liao-Yang* with a subgenre of highly topical popular fiction from this period that also explicitly exalts Japanese military heroism: juvenile adventure novels like Kirk Munroe’s *For the Mikado, Or a Japanese Middy in Action* (1905) and Herbert Strang’s *Kobo: A Story of the Russo-Japanese War* (1905). These books unequivocally celebrate a particular sort of heroism they offer as typically ‘Japanese’ – a heroism doubly meriting admiration from US readers because in each case the professional Japanese military hero dies a suitable and highly efficacious death after inspiring his Western protege.

Both the Japanese hero of *For the Mikado*, Takemitsu Matsu, and the novel’s young American protagonist, Dun Brownleigh, are enrolled at the US Naval Academy, where they quickly become steadfast friends, help the Navy win the big game against the Army (Matsu’s jiu-jitsu skills conveniently come in handy on the football field), then rush off to serve the Mikado as soon as war is declared. After being captured and escaping, resisting mutinous Chinese ‘coolies’, stealing a Russian submarine and sinking an enemy destroyer, they face their final test at Port Arthur. Blockading the mined harbour is

Admiral Togo’s mighty fleet of battle-ships, cruisers, destroyers, hospital-ships, colliers, repair-ships, and transports, lying quietly at anchor, with banned fires, but in readiness for instant action . . . everywhere over the placid surface darted launches and dispatch-boats; everywhere were signs of ceaseless activity without a trace of confusion; and over all proudly floated the sun-rayed banner of Japan, the new world-power of the Orient.²³

This striking celebratory tableau of ascendant Japanese militarism still, however, requires an individual act of self-sacrifice to be complete. So

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young Matsu, true to his unswerving patriotism, dies for Japan by crashing a miniature submarine into a sunken Russian battleship. At the funeral for this heroic martyr, Matsu’s casket is draped with the flags of both the USA and Japan, signifying the ‘bonds of closest sympathy’ between the ‘the most western nation of the world and its most eastern.’

Like the swordplay scenes in *The Hero of Liao-Yang*, Munroe’s lovingly detailed accounts of jiu-jitsu and other Japanese martial arts connect to a substantial discursive strain: advertisements and how-to articles, cartoons, descriptions of Japanese wrestling and kendo, coloured photographs of archers and swordsmen in traditional attire, and instructional books like Harry Skinner’s *Jiu-Jitsu* (1904). Such texts define Japanese masculinity above all in terms of the disciplined, untechnologized, even archaic body, animated by the power and persistence of *bushido* in twentieth-century Japan. The key book in this regard is *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*, Inazo Nitobe’s often-reprinted ‘exposition of Japanese thought’ in English, which first appeared in 1905. ‘Bushido,’ claims Nitobe, ‘was and still is the animating spirit, the motor force of our country’. Nowhere is this more evident than on the battlefield:

what won the battles on the Yalu, in Corea [sic] and Manchuria, were the ghosts of our fathers, guiding our hands and beating in our hearts. They are not dead, those ghosts, the spirits of our warlike ancestors. To those who have eyes to see, they are clearly visible. Scratch a Japanese of the most advanced ideas, and he will show a samurai . . . the summons of the present is to guard this heritage.

*Bushido: The Soul of Japan* thus testifies to the causal link between Old and New Japan that was only implied by *The Hero of Liao-Yang*, where the protagonist’s battlefield exploits followed but were not in any direct way guided or animated by the ‘spirits’ he pays homage to in the first half of the film.

‘Why the Japs Win’ is actually answered in two ways in *The Hero of Liao-Yang*: through narrative, in the actions of the hero, and through spectacle, in the final image of a Japanese artillery bombardment. As I have suggested, the presence of archaic rituals and swordplay during the first part of the film evokes a broader American discourse about martial arts, *bushido* and samurai values. The hero’s participation in a decidedly modern war effort when the film moves out of Japan to the combat zone – and, in particular, the film’s final image – likewise connects to a much more expansive discourse, in this case involving not the Japanese soldier per se, but the sophisticated Japanese military machine, designed and equipped for twentieth-century combat.

The relevant early 1900s material on what I will call the Japanese war machine is vast, encompassing print journalism, postcards, stereopticon slides and stereoview cards. One prominent source for information and images was *Collier’s Magazine*, a high-circulation, general-interest
weekly that featured reports from the front and in-depth photographic coverage in virtually every issue during the Russo-Japanese War. While the war was still in progress, Collier’s rushed into print its folio-sized *The Russo-Japanese War: A Photographic and Descriptive Review of the Great Conflict in the Far East*, a ‘pictorial history’, based on information provided by the magazine’s ‘indefatigable representatives at the front’, including well-known war correspondents like Richard Harding Davis, Frederick Palmer and James H. Hare. 

That same year *Collier’s* published *Japan: Her Strength and Beauty*, a photographic celebration of ‘the recreated, the new Japan’, while an even more extensive collection from *Collier’s* appeared in 1905, under the title, *A Photographic Record of the Russo-Japanese War*.

The first of *Collier’s* volumes on the war begins with a set of images notably absent from *The Hero of Liao-Yang*: individual portraits of the Emperor and Japan’s military leaders in full regalia, all appropriately serious, formally posed and never made to look archaic or non-Western. Notwithstanding these photographs of the top brass, *Collier’s Russo-Japanese War* does not primarily focus on high-ranking officers or, for that matter, on heroic soldiers. It is Japan’s ‘military organization’ that most impresses *Collier’s*. Image after image corroborates what the written text explicitly declares, demonstrating that the Japanese forces are vastly superior to their Russian opponents: superbly equipped, more mobile, more ‘agile’ and, above all, better prepared as a result of the ‘almost microscopic exactness with which every possible contingency had been foreseen and provided for’.

*Collier’s* vision of the Japanese war effort is echoed across a number of other books, like B.L. Putnam Weale’s two-volume *Re-Shaping of the Far East* (1905), which marvels at the ‘perfection of the Japanese military machine’. ‘Hand in hand with the passage of the Yalu came other Japanese moves’, Weale writes, ‘each one careful and deliberate to despair, but withal synchronising so admirably that the feeling of a relentless machine moving pitilessly down on them possessed all Russian commanders, and exercised a moral influence of the most convincing kind’.

Similar points are stressed in Tyler’s illustrated history of the war, which sees throughout the Japanese advances on land and sea the workings of a ‘splendid machine’, ‘directed by one uniform purpose and striving towards one great common end’, carrying out its strategic goals ‘with almost machine-like regularity and precision’. The Japanese soldier, from this perspective, is best understood as ‘a perfectly working factor of the great machine-like army in whose pride he is a unit’.

The majority of *Collier’s* images document this Japanese military machine in relentless operation, moving men and supplies, occupying territory, maintaining all-important lines of communication, caring for casualties, conducting funeral rites, constructing bridges and making effective use of Korean labour. ‘Boatload after boatload of these little [Japanese] soldiers with their inscrutable, unimpassioned faces’ were landed in Korea, the caption to one photo declares, with everything in...
‘perfect order’. Indeed, the greatest compliment that a Collier’s correspondent can offer is that the Japanese army’s march through Korea ‘has been as smooth and orderly as that of a British column in India, the organization as efficient in every way’ (see figure 11). At the same time, Collier’s preference for panoramic, deep-focus photographs renders the disputed territory itself as vast and depopulated, a seemingly ‘empty’ field on which the Japanese military can be deployed. When this magazine turns to the Koreans and Manchurians, these ‘inscrutable and unimpassioned’ Asian ‘peasants’ are invariably seen not as utterly dedicated, efficient soldiers, but as non-modern and ‘apathetic’ bystanders, further underscoring Japan’s privileged status vis-a-vis the nations of the West.

With only a handful of performers allotted to each image and no diegetic explanation of Japanese military strategy, The Hero of Liao-Yang evokes none of the mechanistic efficiency and grand systemic order that Collier’s sees in the Japanese war effort. Instead, the film’s figuration of Japan’s twentieth-century-styled military power comes from its concluding image of an extended artillery barrage, which fills the frame with smoke. Lacking the deep-focus clarity of Collier’s photographs, the final image of The Hero of Liao-Yang could be taken to signify the technological might of the New Japan, even as this image hints – perhaps unintentionally – at the impossibility of visualizing modern warfare. Turning on the Biograph leads ultimately to a smoke-filled screen in which the visible markers of traditional Japanese masculinity, so strikingly evident in the first half of the film, have disappeared or been subsumed by the powerful munitions of the New Japan.

While Biograph’s hero of Liao-Yang proves to be adept with a revolver (in a shoot-out that closely resembles scenes from other period films, like The Moonshiner and even The Great Train Robbery [1903]),
he has no wartime need for the samurai sword or cutlass that figure so centrally as cultural props on the home front. What he absolutely requires, however, is the assistance of a Chinese coolie to help him pull off his escape from the obtuse Russians, who always seem to outnumber him. Rising after being buried alive is an ingenious ploy – a piece of Orientalized magic and adventure story pluck. At the same time, this escape allegorizes rather transparently one view of Asian geopolitics: Japan, with the necessary assistance of China, remains more than a match for Russia. The implications of this superiority on the battlefield and this intra-Asian collaboration haunt much of the Russo-Japanese War discourse, including, but not limited to, abiding anxieties in the Euro-American West concerning the Yellow Peril’s looming threat.

Surveying the prospect of impending combat in the fall of 1904, correspondent David Fraser pondered the future:

as yet I could not see horse, foot, or artillery. But within range of sight they lay to the number of well nigh half a million men – some busy at their guns, others marching into position, many at their stations. The magnitude, the significance of the issues which this scene suggested, almost paralyzed the mind. The concentrated energy of two great races was here collected to contend, the one part against the other, for supremacy. At stake was the destiny of the Orient.

For contemporary observers like Fraser, there was little chance of underestimating the ‘magnitude’ of the Russo-Japanese War. The question was how to assign appropriate ‘significance’, sufficient symbolic weight, to this world-altering struggle – a struggle frequently understood to be at once a clash of civilizations, an unprecedented bloodbath, an auspicious or ominous reveille for the twentieth century and a racial conflict with global implications. In accounts of this decidedly modern war, what part was assigned to Japan? Perhaps surprisingly, Trumbell White begins his 1904 book, War between Japan and Russia: The Complete Story of the Desperate Struggle between Two Great Nations with Dominion over the Orient as the Tremendous Prize, by asking whether ‘it be Russia or Japan that is fighting on the side of occidental civilization’. This is not simply a rhetorical question. White reasons that, while Japan may not be a Christian nation, ‘the spirit of the Island Empire is stirred to freedom, justice, enlightenment, advancement’. Read from this angle, New Japan is the latest avatar of political liberalism and the Enlightenment and so emerges as the standard bearer of the occidental in the war against uncivilized – albeit Christian – Russia.

Writing in Harper’s Weekly in March 1904, a month into the Russo-Japanese War, Charles Johnston was less sanguine about whether Americans appropriately ‘appreciate the significance of the New Japan.’ ‘Appreciating’ for Johnston meant duly acknowledging the power and potential imperialist influence of Japan in the Pacific and beyond (see figure 12). Anything less, and we – Americans, the West, whites – would
only be imperiled by our own blindness, falsely secure in our now-discredited faith in what Johnston calls ‘white supremacy’. For Johnston, the ‘universal significance’ of the ongoing war was abundantly clear: Japan ‘is the first Asian power thoroughly to master the modern science and mechanism of war’. Such mastery only was possible because the New Japan combined the lessons of Prussian militarism with its own highly efficient ‘power of organization’, its ‘endless energy’, its elite class of officers – latter-day ‘samurai’ – and its deeply masculinist, ‘entire exclusion of the imaginative and emotional nature, of all the softer elements of life’.  

35 Johnston’s striking vision of a proto-fascist Japan would, after 1905, figure more prominently in the discourse, corresponding to and fuelling a growing anxiety about the supposedly tangible threat that Japan was poised to engage the USA in a potentially apocalyptic race war.  

36 Yet for all the references to the Yellow Peril and to Nippon’s ‘little brown soldiers’, the racial identity of the New Japan could be gauged not only in terms of this nation’s non-whiteness, but also in terms of its relative homogeneity. Indeed, the much-noted racial ‘purity’ of Japan was sometimes cited as one explanation for Japanese military success. Frederick McCormick, for instance, concludes his two-volume *Tragedy of Russia in Pacific Asia* by claiming that Japan’s victory was the triumph of a homogeneous race over the ‘heterogeneous and conglomerate’ Russia, with its vastly inferior army drawn from ‘peasants in Europe and Asia, even
Chinese and ‘Siberians’. From one perspective, New Japan could thus represent an unattainable ideal for white Americans residing in a racially mixed (if segregated), increasingly ‘heterogeneous and conglomerate’ nation – an ideal made even more compelling given ‘the fierce, almost fanatical fervor of their [Japanese] patriotism’, their expansionist aims, and their *bushido*-inflected modernity. At the same time, like Biograph’s hero of Liao-Yang, New Japan could be seen as bound to but not bound by the homeland, its military success coterminous with the traditional pastimes and filial rituals of an age-old patriarchal culture.

It would in some respects have been much easier for Western eyes if Japan at the dawn of the twentieth century were vanishing rather than increasing in geopolitical prominence and thus were more akin to the celebrated-in-passing Native American – that is, if the Japanese Way of Death somehow meant the death of Japan in a literal working out of Theodore Roosevelt’s notion of ‘race suicide’. Yet through the sacrifices of its heroes, New Japan gained territory and international stature, and much of the highly topical material I have referred to in this article – from stereoview images to juvenile fiction – suggests that armed and assertive Japanese masculinity was not simply newsworthy for American audiences, but admirable in death as in life.

Thus, without ever actually witnessing any combat during his months as a war correspondent, John Fox Jr still felt bound to confess that

as far as I can make out at long distance, the Japanese army and the individual Japanese soldier seem the best in the world; the soldier for the reason that he cares no more for death than the average Occidental for an afternoon nap – the army for the reason that the Bushido [sic] spirit – feudal fealty – having been transferred from Daimio and Samurai to Colonel and General – gives it a discipline that seems perfect.39

Through the frustrating, anti-climactic travels recounted in his aptly titled memoir, *Following the Sun-Flag: A Vain Pursuit through Manchuria*, Fox never gets any closer to an individual Japanese soldier. Yet his vision of unseen Japanese masculinity as superior, disciplined, purposeful, energetic and ego-less is simply too compelling for Fox to give up, for it is at once a purified alternative to and a portent of the end of the Occidental.

Although Fox never succeeds in coming face-to-face with Japanese masculinity, as he ventures into Asia, looking futilely for his own hero of Liao-Yang, one sight in particular sticks with him, making him shudder with a deep recognition of the stakes of the Russo-Japanese War:

We had a shock and a thrill to-day... a few carts filled with wounded Japanese passed slowly by. In one cart sat a man in a red shirt, with a white handkerchief tied over his head and under his chin. Facing him was a bearded Japanese with a musket between his knees. The man in the red shirt wearily turned his face. It was young, smooth-shaven and

38 Tyler, *Japan-Russia War*, p. 246.
white. The thrill was that the man was the first Russian prisoner we had seen – the shock that among those yellow faces was a captive with a skin like ours. I couldn’t help feeling pity and shame – pity for him and a shame for myself that I needn’t explain ... Blood is thicker than water – or anything else – in the end.40

Chasing the sun-flag across Manchuria brings Fox not merely disappointment, but shame so obviously warranted and appropriate that it needs no explanation. Apparently, Fox’s self-professed Japanophilia is reason enough.

*The Hero of Liao-Yang* – with its own share of Japanophilia – contains no such visual (and visceral) moment of race awareness, when a glimpse of whiteness throws all else into perspective. I doubt that it would have been possible, under any screening conditions, to see an unbridgeable racial gulf between yellow and white registered this tangibly in *The Hero of Liao-Yang*. Biograph’s hero is unambiguously gendered and repeatedly marked as a cultural and national subject, but he is not overtly raced, not designated as ‘coloured’ by an explanatory intertitle or a hand-tinted image, by an unmistakable application of brownface or by a closer shot that reveals the features of the actor. So we are left with two apparently contradictory possibilities: firstly, literalized brownness would be superfluous since the hero’s race is implied by the fact that he is marked culturally as Japanese, in which case race is synonymous with culture; and secondly, the absence of colour makes the nameless Japanese hero of Liao-Yang, by default or by intention, white, and – therefore? – that much more unproblematically heroic.

Attempting to identify, contextualize and interpret the topicality of *The Hero of Liao-Yang* requires that we explore the rich, varied, pervasive and historically specific discourse in the USA concerning the Russo-Japanese War in particular and Japanese masculinity more generally. At the Asian edge of the Pacific in the midst of this war, John Fox Jr finds wounded, weary whiteness, captive to the New Japan. Meanwhile, the Biograph Studio in New York City produces and releases *The Hero of Liao-Yang*, Collier’s offers its weekly illustrated dispatch from the front, Underwood & Underwood distributes more stereoviews, and the *Cleveland Leader* runs another editorial cartoon. Working through such texts we can map a network of interconnected concerns that help to explain the early twentieth-century USA’s heightened interest in the New Japan: the ascendance of a new-yet-old militarism, the power of national masculinity, the efficacy of modernization and the significance of racial identity and racial purity. The conjunction of these concerns can vary significantly from text to text, even month to month, reflecting the vagaries of topicality and the complexity of issues at stake when Japan loomed large for American audiences. An awareness of this cultural history helps us recognize and explain the particular evocation of Japaneseness, the absence of colour as racial marker and the journey of
heroic Japanese masculinity from home front to smoke-filled battlefield in *The Hero of Liao-Yang*.

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