

Chapter II

Komura in His Element

— Crazy and Pigheaded, as the Times Called For

The Crazy and the Pigheaded

Once transferred to the forefront position of Japan's diplomacy from the inconspicuous translation bureau of the foreign ministry, Komura immediately distinguished himself. Komura became a central figure in Japanese diplomacy in a short period of time.

After being appointed to *chargé d'affaires* at the Japanese legation in Qing in 1893 (26th Year of Meiji), Komura successively assumed important posts as the civilian administrator for territories Japan had captured in Manchuria in 1894 during the First Sino-Japanese War; Director-General of Policy Affairs of the foreign ministry also in 1894; Japanese minister to Korea in 1895; Vice Minister for Foreign Affairs in 1896; Japanese minister¹ to the United States in 1898; Japanese minister to Russia in 1900 and Japanese minister to Qing in the same year; and, eventually, Minister for Foreign Affairs in 1901. As foreign minister, the post which he kept until 1906, Komura engaged in all affairs related to the Russo-Japanese War. Compared with his ten years of obscurity prior to 1893, it was almost as if Komura had become a totally different person in these years.

Komura's rapid promotion was certainly due to his capabilities and courage that stood out among fellow bureaucrats. In fact, he had always been competent. At the translation bureau, for instance, Komura's written English was reputed to be unparalleled in its refinement. He was also so audacious that people around him would often cringe. But nobody in those days put the two elements together to appreciate Komura's entire personality. Instead, he was regarded as a poorly balanced man who was inept at getting on in the world.

In pre-World War II Japan, there was no such expression as "a well-balanced man." Instead, such virtues as courage and boldness were

¹ Present-day ambassador. Until Japan ranked among major powers after the victory in the Russo-Japanese War, Japanese delegates were received as ministers, not as ambassadors by host countries.

more emphasized as man's virtues. In postwar Japan, however, "a well-balanced person" has become both a household term and one of the highest forms of praise for an adult.

The Sung dynasty statesman/poet Su Shi (also known as Su Dongpo) (蘇軾 or 蘇東坡, 1037–1101) once wrote:

When peace has not yet been attained, people would compete with one another to demonstrate their own abilities. Once peace is attained, however, those in power would disfavor the brave and the ambitious and, instead, promote those who were spineless and punctilious. Within a few decades, those with abilities are deprived of opportunities to distinguish themselves with their talents, while those without abilities become even more inertial.

When this happens, when the emperor looks around for a capable retainer to help him accomplish his own policy, he will find none. High-ranking vassals would be preoccupied with posing as unfathomable great men, while lowly retainers would repeatedly preach the virtue of the "middle course" (more properly "being well-balanced") . . . only to manifest how incompetent they really are.

Su Shi went on to deliberate on the deviation of the interpretation of the "middle road" from the original Confucian concept. According to Su Shi, Confucius and Mencius denounced those who used the "middle road" as in the above quote as "enemies of virtue." They would rather be with the crazy (the *kyōsha* or 狂者, those with great aspiration but unable to translate it into reality) or, if not, with the pig-headed (*kenja* or 狷者, those who may be short in capabilities but are determined to defend specific values). The former is someone who will do things others will not, while the latter is someone who has faith in not necessarily doing whatever everyone else is doing. Su Shi, thus, insists that there is nothing better than promoting someone who is at once crazy and pig-headed, and also wise in order to wake the world from its lazy dream.

It was fashionable among people in the Meiji era to call themselves *kyō*, or crazy. Yamagata Aritomo, for instance, named himself "Kyōsuke," while

Mutsu Munemitsu used “Rokuseki Kyōfu” as an appellation, calling himself the crazy whose ambition was too big for him.

In this sense, Komura was indeed both crazy and pig-headed. Whatever he might have been, he could never be classified as a well-balanced person. When the Japanese bureaucracy began to show signs of sclerosis thirty years after the Meiji Restoration, Japan must have been in such a crisis—that is, the First Sino-Japanese War followed by the Russo-Japanese War—that the nation found the poorly balanced Komura irreplaceable. It was in fact after the Russo-Japanese War that historical evaluation of Komura’s achievement became divided. At every moment of crisis prior to that time, his judgment had always proven to be accurate, backing up the appropriateness of Komura’s promotion. Japan at that time needed the crazy and the pig-headed, a calling of the time to which Komura responded splendidly.

In this chapter, I intend to briefly review Komura’s accomplishments prior to the climax of his career during the Anglo-Japanese Alliance/Russo-Japanese War days.

Fighting It Out with Qing Is the Best Plan

Appointment to *chargé d'affaires* at the Japanese legation in Qing was more a continuation of the foreign ministry’s cold treatment of Komura than a promotion. It so happened that when his post as Director-General of the Translation Bureau had to be eliminated as a part of administrative reform, Komura’s friends suggested that it was time he be given an overseas post. Thus the foreign ministry decided to post Komura to Qing.

Japan’s interest in Qing in those days was unimaginably lower than that of today. To begin with, the largest concern for Foreign Minister Mutsu himself was the revision of the unequal treaties with the Western powers. Furthermore, the main arena for Japan’s own diplomacy was the Korean peninsula. While it was customary for the minister to Korea to serve concurrently as minister to Qing, he hardly ever visited Beijing because he was swamped with Korean affairs. It was against this background that Komura became *de facto* in charge of the negotiations with Qing as the acting minister despite his official position of *chargé d'affaires*.

Also in those days, elites in the foreign ministry were stationed in Europe

and the United States; appointments to Asian countries were considered to be demotions. It is amazing that this attitude remained in the Japanese foreign ministry even until very recently when Asian countries began to show remarkable growth.

Nevertheless, Komura declared that the post in Qing was just what he had hoped for. It would be a great opportunity for him to study about China, he claimed, because in contrast to his knowledge of the Western powers, he was ignorant about China. This kind of comment could come only from someone who was genuinely concerned about the future of Japanese diplomacy, paying no heed to his bureaucratic career. In fact, as soon as Komura was stationed in Beijing, he became painfully aware of the inadequacy of China studies in Japan, and began to avidly read books on China by Western experts. He also sought meetings with a wide range of Japanese and non-Japanese residents in Beijing in order to hear their advice.

Komura was particularly interested in the prospect of a possible war between Japan and Qing. After careful observation of the discipline and morale of Qing soldiers, Komura concluded that Qing would not pose a serious threat to Japan. He became convinced that “Korea will inevitably become the source of turmoil in Asia, and this fundamental issue would decide the fate of Japan. As long as Qing continues to insist on ruling Korea, despite its ailing power, the best plan for Japan is to fight a decisive battle with Qing.” This conviction remained the base of Komura’s subsequent policies toward Qing and Korea.

Eruption of the First Sino-Japanese War

The opportunity for a decisive war came sooner than he had expected. Six months after Komura assumed his post in Beijing, the Donghak Peasant Revolution erupted in Korea. This marked the beginning of the rapid march of events toward the war between Japan and Qing.

As is apparent in Mutsu’s memoir, *Kenkenroku*, it was Mutsu Munemitsu who played a central role in the Japanese government to manipulate the course toward the First Sino-Japanese War. Komura, however, despite his lowly position as mere acting minister to Qing, also engineered Japan toward a war with Qing at every juncture of his official duty by making it difficult to

reverse course—ahead of Mutsu’s own planning.

During the exchange between the Japanese and Qing governments over Korea, Komura received the Japanese government’s ultimatum, which he was instructed to hand deliver to the Qing side. The ultimatum read:

The Qing side merely demands the unilateral withdrawal of Japanese troops from Korea and refuses to sit at the negotiation table with Japan. This is a clear indication that the Qing government deliberately looks for trouble.

Reading this ultimatum, Komura decided to add at his discretion “with the intention of starting a conflict” to provoke the Qing side.

When the war appeared imminent and unavoidable, Komura handed the declaration of the severance of diplomatic relations to the Qing government even before official instruction to do so had arrived from the headquarters in Tokyo, lowered the national flag at the Japanese embassy, and pulled the diplomatic mission out of Beijing.

The official instruction to sever diplomatic relations actually had been dispatched, but its arrival was delayed due to the poor communications infrastructure. Nevertheless, Komura was heard to say, “If we waste any more time, we might lose the chance to start the war. All right, I will be the one to start the war.” Also, on board the homebound ship, Komura freely revealed his thoughts to foreign journalists, which stirred some controversy. To do all of these things, it takes a resolute man like Komura, who was concerned only about state affairs and paid no heed to whatever reprimand or demotion he might have to incur as a consequence.

When Komura arrived in Tokyo, Mutsu was at Shimbashi Station to meet him. Komura said that he had come back resolved to be reprimanded, but Mutsu cut him off saying, “What you did was just fine. The situation has evolved exactly as you had predicted.” It may have been at this moment that Mutsu strongly felt that he had found an able person he could rely on as his successor. In fact, it was after this incident that Mutsu started to promote Komura to important positions at every occasion.

Firm Creed in Management of Manchuria

After returning from Beijing, Komura was appointed to civilian administrator for the territories that Japan's First Army had captured in Manchuria in 1894.

Komura's occupation policy was based on his "five-point law" which reflected Liu Bang's (劉邦, builder of Han Empire) three-point law (法三章). Liu declared the three-point law to the former citizens of the Qin Empire (秦) when he conquered its capital city, Guanzhong (關中). To the citizens of Guanzhong, who had suffered under centralized tyranny and been oppressed by harsh laws, Liu declared,

You all suffered for a long time under the tyranny of Qin. Now I am to rule Guanzhong. I now decree a three-point law: Those who kill shall be executed; those who cause injury shall be punished; and those who steal and rob shall be convicted. All other laws of Qin are abolished.

This declaration was enthusiastically welcomed by the Guanzhong people. Komura's five-point law included, aside from the death penalty on thieves and arsonists, three additional points that were deemed essential for the wartime administration, including a nighttime curfew and a ban on the transportation of goods outside the city. Citizens of the occupied areas welcomed the impartial implementation of these rules by Komura's administration, and people who had evacuated the area started returning to their houses one by one to resume their daily lives.

Dugald Christie (author of *Thirty Years in Mukden*), a Red Cross worker in Manchuria in those days, left the following observation on the Japanese wartime administration in Manchuria:

For the first few months, the arrival of the Japanese troops was seen with horror. But by the spring of 1895, people accepted their rules with equanimity. This change of attitude on the part of the Chinese was attributable to the unexpectedly well-disciplined soldiers of the Japanese troops and their benevolent rules. While there were cases of unruly conduct by some of these soldiers in the beginning, their conduct gradually became strictly controlled, and the local people

began to benefit from the orderly administration.

This should be regarded as a generally fair description of how things were under the Japanese occupation, including the cases of self-indulgence among Japanese soldiers during battle and the early days of the occupation, which was followed by strict but tolerant rule. While it is believed that a massacre took place during the battle of Lüshun, it is not hard to imagine that the Japanese troops were nevertheless welcomed by the people of the occupied areas as the discipline of the Japanese troops in those days was much better than that of Qing's local military.

When Komura returned from his duty as civilian administrator in the area occupied by Japanese troops, Emperor Meiji summoned him to the Imperial Palace and personally inquired of him about the situation in Manchuria.

Mutsu had already predicted by this time that it would be difficult to keep the Liaodong peninsula even if Japan won the First Sino-Japanese War and planned the occupation of Taiwan instead. Mutsu had instructed Komura beforehand not to overemphasize the importance of Manchuria to the emperor. This is another indication of Mutsu's foresightedness and shrewdness.

Against Mutsu's instruction, however, Komura eloquently emphasized how promising a land Manchuria was for the future of Japan and how important the Liaodong peninsula was for Japan's defense. Komura continued even when Mutsu tugged the hem of Komura's frock coat to stop him. After they retired from the imperial audience, Komura defended his conduct by saying, "I was so tense in front of His Imperial Majesty that I completely forgot your instruction." In response to this, the only thing Mutsu could do was to smile wryly, as if to say, "You are hopeless." To Mutsu, Komura was at once crazy and pigheaded, just as Mutsu liked.

It appeared that by that time Komura as an imperialist had already harbored an unshakable political conviction about the importance of Manchuria that he consistently cherished during and after the Russo-Japanese War.

As soon as the general policy was set for the administration of the occupied region in Manchuria, Komura was called back to the heart of the foreign ministry in Tokyo to steer Japan's diplomacy as a whole as the

ministry's director-general of political affairs. Succumbing to the strain of overwork since his days in Manchuria, however, Komura developed a high fever and was hospitalized immediately prior to the official announcement of the Triple Intervention.

After being discharged from the hospital, Komura stayed in Ōiso, a seaside resort near Tokyo, to recuperate. Meanwhile, the international situation after the First Sino-Japanese War was undergoing great change, which did not allow Komura to rest.

The Assassination of Empress Myeongseong

After the conclusion of the First Sino-Japanese War, the faction in the Korean court headed by Empress Myeongseong (閔妃), the first official wife of King Gojong (高宗), advocated stronger ties with Russia in an attempt to block Japanese influence in Korea. In response, the Japanese side collaborated with the anti-Empress faction within the court and, eventually, dispatched assassins to Gyeongbok Palace to assassinate the Empress on October 8, 1895. When this assassination was suspected to be masterminded by Miura Gorō (三浦梧楼), the Japanese minister to Korea at that time, the incident became a serious international issue. Since nobody else but Komura could handle this issue, he accepted an appointment as the new Japanese minister to Korea and rushed to Seoul, despite the adamant objection of his doctor.

Komura immediately sent back to Japan members of the Japanese diplomatic mission to Korea as well as desperados who were suspected of being involved in this incident. In an attempt to get things under control, he tried to appeal Japan's good intentions to the Korean court and diplomatic missions of the Western powers stationed in Seoul. Despite these efforts, however, the Korean court, in consultation with the Russian government, evacuated to the Russian embassy in Seoul, from which it issued the imperial ordinance, under the Russian protection, to execute all the pro-Japanese cabinet members of the Korean government. Accordingly, ministers identified as such were brutally slaughtered.

Coming home from Korea, Komura paid a visit to Katsu Kaishū. When Katsu asked Komura about the situation in Korea, the latter replied, "I encountered the same difficulty as Your Excellency did toward the end of the

Tokugawa shogunate.” To the puzzled Katsu, Komura added, “Like you, I was also in a hopeless situation because the opponent side seized the king”—to which both had a hearty laugh.

Thus, all the pro-Japanese forces being annihilated, this assassination incident caused Japan to lose all of its footholds that it had won in Korea through the First Sino-Japanese War.

Among the desperados sent back to Japan by Komura was Yosano Tekkan, a nationalist poet and, later, husband to poetess Yosano Akiko. Among the poems that Yosano composed in those days was the following waka:

How could I die in Korea
Before witnessing an interesting war
Ten years later

In the minds of desperados, there already existed the vision of the Russo-Japanese War that erupted ten years hence. Komura himself was, in a sense, a kind of desperado and, thus, he must have shared the same anticipation. Komura’s conviction that Japan sooner or later would have to confront Russia, one of the most powerful nations in the world in those days, must have been formed around this time. Given the subsequent conduct of Russia, Komura’s conviction that there could be no other way than a war with Russia proved to be highly accurate.

“Although Japan might be weak now, wait and see in ten years” was an attitude commonly seen among the Japanese in those days, revealing the self-confidence that Meiji Japanese had about their own future.

If Only It Had Happened Ten Years Later

After Komura returned from Korea in 1896, he was appointed to vice minister for foreign affairs. It was during Komura’s tenure as vice minister that the United States annexed Hawaii. When that happened, Komura cried out, “Oh, dear, if only it had happened ten years later!”

King Kalakaua of the Kingdom of Hawaii visited Japan as a state guest during his trip around the world in 1881. During his stay in Japan, King Kalakaua pleaded for Japan’s help, lamenting, “The influence of the

Westerners is becoming overwhelming in Hawaii and, if unrestricted, it will threaten the future of my kingdom.” As a countermeasure to the growing influence of the Westerners, King Kalakaua suggested that:

Although I do not have a prince, I have a highly gifted niece. I happened to know that Prince Yamashina Sadamaro is an outstanding member of the Japanese Imperial family. I would be truly grateful if a marriage between His Highness and my niece is permitted.

Although the majority of those present at the Imperial family conference and the cabinet meeting held in the Imperial presence was favorable to this proposition, Emperor Meiji himself appealed for prudence and, finally, it was decided that King Kalakaua’s proposal should be declined. Judging from the wording used in the reply to the Hawaiian royal house, obviously this decision was reached lest Japan should compete with the United States for influence in Hawaii.

Emperor Meiji’s concern was justified. In the instruction given to the American minister to Hawaii in December 1881, U.S. Secretary of State James Blaine emphasized the strategic importance of Hawaii for the United States, revealing its intention to make Hawaii a de facto annexed territory.

Subsequently, the group centered around American residents in Hawaii rallied to abolish the Hawaiian monarchy, accusing it of being tyrannical, and declared the establishment of a revolutionary government in 1893. Although the royalist faction tried to resist this coup, Queen Liliuokalani was forced to declare “temporary abdication” in the face of the landing of 160 sailors and a few cannons from the U.S. battleship, although she vainly protested the conduct of the U.S. government. This became the de facto end of the Kamehameha Dynasty.

It is not difficult to imagine that those American “revolutionary forces” did not by any means represent the will of the majority of Hawaiians. An 1896 survey conducted by the Japanese legation revealed that, of the total Hawaiian population of 110,000 people, native Hawaiians and British, German, and French nationals were adamantly against the annexation of Hawaii. The majority of the 1,900 Americans there, some of whom were the royalists, also opposed annexation. It was only five to six hundred Americans

who were enthusiastically in favor of the annexation.

The Japanese government also issued an official protest in which it pointed out that “only a small portion of Hawaiian nationals support the annexation.” Upset by this statement, the U.S. government flatly refuted it, declaring that only the government could judge the will of its own people and, therefore, the Japanese government’s reference, as an outsider, to the will of Hawaiian nationals was simply beyond comprehension.

Certainly, it was meaningless to speak of the people’s will in the midst of the era of imperialism. And subsequent history witnessed Japan taking similar actions to this American conduct. At the time of Japan’s annexation of Korea, key members behind the movement—*Iljinhoe* (一進会 or *Isshinkai* in Japanese, meaning Progress Party)—were local Koreans, not foreign nationals as was the case in Hawaii. But the forces that the movement succeeded in mustering were, similar to the Hawaiian incident, far less than the one million that the advocate claimed. In both cases, the American revolutionary forces and *Iljinhoe* were able to achieve the annexation of Hawaii and Korea only because they had the protection of the American and Japanese military might, respectively.

It all depended on the will of the United States. During President Benjamin Harrison’s Republican administration (1889–93), the United States was on the brink of annexing Hawaii, while the succeeding Democratic administration under President Grover Cleveland (1893–97) took a noninterference policy, claiming that the Hawaiian people themselves should decide their own governing body, during which the Hawaiian annexation was temporarily shelved. When Republican William McKinley was elected to president in 1896, however, the argument for annexation was rekindled. The annexation of Hawaii was finally resolved by both Upper and Lower Houses in 1898, as the imperialistic atmosphere in the United States aroused by the Spanish-American War.

Meanwhile, Hoshi Tōru, minister to the United States advised the Itō government that Japan should block the annexation even if it required the dispatch of Japanese battleships. Foreign Minister Ōkuma also instructed that an official protest be issued. This protest was far more belligerent than the U.S. government had anticipated, as it was a gesture to the Japanese Diet which had been criticizing Ōkuma’s weak-kneed diplomacy.

Prime Minister Itō was traveling abroad when this incident took place, but he was so apprehensive of Ōkuma's hard-line stance that he found it necessary to send his foreign minister a letter saying, "Since Britain and other Western powers seem to have no intention to obstruct American annexation of Hawaii, a hard-line protest would make the Japanese position difficult. Wouldn't it be more prudent to leave it to the natural course of events?" Actually, it was habitual for Ōkuma to use high-flown language and pose as a hardliner, but in actuality, he hardly delivered what he had bragged about. In this particular incident, too, Ōkuma in the end de-escalated his bragging and started saying that the sole purpose of the dispatch of naval vessels was to protect the Japanese residents in Hawaii.

It would make no sense for Japan to loudly complain when it had no power or determination to confront the United States, as Itō had rightly pointed out. If it had happened ten years later, as Komura said, there could have been a crisis in the Pacific, between the Japanese navy that had emerged as a new hegemon in East Asia by annihilating the Russian fleet and the Mahan-inspired American fleet of Theodore Roosevelt.

Expectations from the Ultrationalist Segment

After serving as vice foreign minister, Komura was appointed Japanese minister to the United States, and he was given a rare opportunity to closely observe the United States in the midst of the era of American imperialism, a highly unusual period in the history of that country.

Subsequently, Komura was transferred to Russia as the Japanese minister. En route to Saint Petersburg, Komura visited London to observe the situation in Britain. The main concern for the British people in those days was the decline of their country, as the nation was militarily bogged down in the Boer War and diplomatically isolated. But Komura judged that this experience must have taught Britain a good lesson, making it more resilient in the future. To Komura, Britain remained a reliable superpower, and the scheme to team up with Britain to confront Russia must have already entered Komura's mind by this time.

Once in Saint Petersburg, Komura, with his insight on Asia, immediately became an influential figure in the diplomatic community. Komura was one of only a few people who knew what was going on in Asia, which was in a

state of constant flux. Nevertheless, Komura's tenure in Russia had to be cut short again. In the face of the international conference to address the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion (義和団事件, 1898–1901), it was unanimously decided that nobody but Komura could represent Japan at this conference. Thus, Komura headed for Beijing via Tokyo.

During his one-week stopover in Tokyo, Komura was asked by such ultranationalists as Konoe Atsumaro (近衛篤磨) and Sugiura Shigetake (杉浦重剛) to give a public lecture. Konoe was from the noblest of the noble families, grandson of Shimazu Hisamitsu (島津久光) of the Satsuma-*han*, and father of the latter-day Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro (近衛文磨). He was a hope of the Court nobles and was deemed as future candidate for prime minister along with Saionji Kimmochi. Unfortunately, Konoe met a premature death. During his short life, however, Konoe established a Pan-Asian political movement called *Toa Dōbunkai* (東亜同文会, East Asia Common Literary Culture Society), which promoted mutual understanding and improvement in relations between Japan and Qing after the First Sino-Japanese War, as well as *Tairo Doshikai* (対露同志会, Anti-Russia Society), which pushed for a hard-line foreign policy toward the Russian Empire.

While Komura put a high value on the bureaucratic and secretive discipline when conducting his official duties, he opened up to those ultranationalist people. Komura started his public lecture on current international affairs with the following announcement:

It is needless to say that the secrets of foreign policies should never be exposed. It is because I trust the nobility of your character that I will disclose a part of the current state of affairs. I therefore expect that you will not betray my trust.

Komura concluded that, while the best foreign policy authorities could do was to apply short-term symptomatic treatments to various current issues, it would be indispensable to raise the consciousness of the Japanese people on foreign affairs. For this, he hoped, education and enlightenment would be effective.

Perhaps inspired by this public lecture, Konoe and his comrades devoted

their time and energy to enlighten the Japanese on foreign affairs and established *Toa Dobun Shoin* (東亜同文書院, East Asia Common Literary Cultural College) in 1900, which trained a number of China specialists who later contributed to Sino-Japanese relations in the pre-World War II days.

While Mutsu had been backed up by the Tosa's freedom and people's rights activists who enabled him to manage the Imperial Diet effectively in its early days of Japanese parliamentary democracy, Komura had always been supported and backed up by the nationalist and ultra-nationalist movement.