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Undercover Acolytes: Honganji, the Japanese Army and Intelligence-Gathering Operations

Abstract: In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as the Japanese Army sought intelligence on the countries neighbouring Japan, the military made use of the Buddhist priesthood as a cover for intelligence gathering. In addition, elements of the Buddhist priesthood, in particular the Kyoto-based Honganji sect, were happy to cooperate with the military in its intelligence gathering operations, either by allowing military officers to disguise themselves as monks or by having Buddhist monks gather military-intelligence for the Japanese Army. This article examines the relationship between the Japanese Army and the Honganji sect following the 1868 Meiji Restoration, the activities of military officers who disguised themselves as Buddhist monks and the intelligence gathering activities of Buddhist monks, hoping to shed more light on the part that Japanese Buddhism played in Japan’s imperial adventures.

KEYWORDS Honganji temple, Japanese Army, intelligence-gathering, Ōtani Kōzui, Ōta Kakumin.

Introduction
The commonly held perception of Buddhism is that it is essentially peaceful, practicing a degree of tolerance for other faiths that is believed to be lacking in Christianity, Islam or Judaism. Scholars have challenged this perception in recent years. Xue Yu, in his study of Chinese Buddhism in the 1930s and 1940s, documents how Chinese monks
were quite capable of being swept up in the spirit of nationalist sentiment that engulfed the country in the wake of the September 1931 Manchurian Incident and responded by taking up arms to fight the Japanese aggressors,\textsuperscript{i} while the work edited by Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer illustrates that since the end of the Second World War there have been other instances in which Buddhism has exhibited its militant side.\textsuperscript{ii} With Japan, a country that has a long history of militant Buddhism, Brian Victoria has shed light on particular aspects of the relationship between the military and religious groups.\textsuperscript{iii} Victoria’s work, however, overlooks a number of the more complex aspects of this relationship.

In Japan before 1945, while Japanese Buddhists and the military usually acted independently of one another, the religion was suborned by the military on occasions to assist in Japan’s continental expansion. This article considers three aspects of the relationship between Buddhism and the military in Japan. First, it considers the practice of monks actively serving as intelligence officers, and military officers pretending to be Buddhist monks as cover for intelligence-gathering activities. Second, it considers the part that Ōtani Kōzui (1876-1948), the abbot of Nishi Honganji, played in this relationship, as well as the abbot’s own intelligence-gathering activities, disguised as expeditions to recover lost Buddhist sutras. Third, it examines the life of Ōta Kakumin (1866-1944), a Buddhist monk who, in all likelihood, was both a monk and an intelligence officer for the better part of his career. Moreover, in the examination of Ōta’s life consideration is given as to how the Japanese military also made use of a number of other religions to expand the country’s sphere of influence in Northeast Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

\textbf{Background}
When Japan emerged from isolation in 1853, Japanese society, and in particular the various religious groups that then existed within Japan, faced a range of challenges. As a number of researchers have noted, for the Buddhist sects the challenges were significantly greater than those faced by Shintō. From 1867, just prior to the Meiji Restoration, there was an organised persecution of Buddhism that left deep wounds and threw the religion into a disorder that was overcome only after decades of struggle.\textsuperscript{iv} By the 1870s almost two-thirds of the Buddhist temples that had existed in Tokugawa Japan had been destroyed by government-sanctioned violence and some even feared that an Imperial Rescript, a declaration by the emperor regarding important state matters, might be issued that would eradicate Buddhism all together.\textsuperscript{v} To regain some degree of standing within the new regime, Japanese Buddhists had to be willing to align themselves with those who now held power. Among those individuals who were willing to compromise with the new order were the prelates of Kyoto’s Honganji order, some of who already had strong links with the government through support of the Restoration effort.\textsuperscript{vi}

Only five years after the Meiji Restoration had replaced the old Tokugawa regime and set Japan on its new course, a monk from Higashi Honganji was dispatched by Ōtani Kōshō, the twenty-first hereditary patriarch of the sect, to the Chinese continent to reconnoiter the possibility of missionary work in China, as well as to ascertain the possibility of an alliance of the Buddhist orders of Japan, China and India in order to bring about an ecumenical revival. The monk, Ogurusu Kōchō (1831-1905), remained in China from July 1873 until August 1874, then returned to Japan, where he reported on what he had observed to Ōtani.\textsuperscript{vii} In the course of his travels, Ogurusu not only visited China proper, but also entered Inner Mongolia to conduct research on Buddhist practices there, before finally journeying to Outer Mongolia with the aim of establishing an East Asian Buddhist Federation.\textsuperscript{viii} Some two years after his return to Japan, Ogurusu
accompanied Ōtani Kōshō when the latter travelled to Tokyo for talks with the Foreign Minister, Terashima Munenori (1832-93). The purpose of these talks was to gain government support for the dispatch of Buddhist missionaries to China. The talks were successful, as in August 1876, a branch temple of Higashi Honganji subsequently opened in Shanghai, staffed by six priests, including Ogurusu Köchō.\textsuperscript{ix}

These first steps ensured that Buddhism, now the poorer cousin of the approved state religion, State Shintō, continued to have a place in the new order. Indeed, as Victoria has noted, the Japanese government lent its support to these efforts because, as a pan-Asian religion, the authorities saw Buddhism as a useful tool in promoting the unity of East Asian people under Japanese hegemony.\textsuperscript{x} This, in turn, meant that Japanese Buddhists were able to portray their missionary trips to China as worthy of state support, and could then lobby the government to protect their missionaries in China.\textsuperscript{xi} In many respects the Japanese Buddhists were simply following the example set by Christian missionaries, who ventured into the interior of China, and attacks on whom were used to justify military intervention by their respective governments, such as the German seizure of Shantung in 1897 following the murder of two missionaries.\textsuperscript{xii}

By the late 1880s, the position of Japanese Buddhism had improved to the extent that when Inoue Enryō (1858-1919) published Bukkyō katsuron joron (Introduction to Revitalising Buddhism), far from being banned or worse, it did much to promote interest in Buddhism among the Western-educated Meiji elite. The book was widely read and highly influential, bringing as it did a new interpretation of Buddhism that linked the religion to the surge in nationalist sentiments of the time.\textsuperscript{xiii} Autobiographical in nature, the book detailed Inoue’s search for truth, a search that lead him to re-embrace Buddhism, and to declare that Japanese Buddhism contained the truth that Western philosophy was, at that time, only just approaching. Moreover, Inoue argued that the “Buddha’s highest teaching, the truth of the Middle Way, existed only in Japan
because it had died out in India and China.” Inoue, despite proclaiming that Japan held the moral high ground, was not averse to calling on his fellow Buddhists to take up arms and fight, contradicting the idea that Buddhism was essentially pacifist in nature. In 1904, just prior to the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War, Inoue declared that not only were the Russians different to the other peoples, but that “putting Russians to death … is not only our duty as citizens, but as fellow Buddhists …,” in essence calling for a “holy war.”

Following Inoue’s interpretation of Japanese Buddhism as the only “true” form of Buddhism a number of sects in Japan sought to proselytize abroad. By the early 1890s the Japanese press was reporting that the Higashi and Nishi Honganji temples had reached a decision to send monks to Central Asia, Mongolia and Siberia, presumably to spread what Inoue termed the “truth of the Middle Way.” The Nishi Honganji branch in Vladivostok was one of the first founded, with Tamon Sokumyō (1820-90) being dispatched to the town in 1886 to minister to the Japanese immigrant population there. The decision to dispatch monks to the continent also appealed to the Japanese military, who saw in the travels of the Buddhist missionaries an unparalleled opportunity for intelligence gathering.

Ōtani Kōzui and Intelligence-gathering Operations

Disguising oneself as a monk was relatively simple; merely by shaving the pate and adopting the saffron robes of the priesthood, a Japanese military officer could pass as a Buddhist acolyte. The idea of a warrior disguising himself as a Buddhist monk as a means of subterfuge was also culturally acceptable, witness the scene in the Kurosawa film *Shichinin no samurai* (Seven Samurai) where the leader of the seven shaves his head to pose as a monk so he can rescue a young boy held hostage by a thief.
Moreover, warrior monks were found throughout Japanese history, so for an individual to be both was not unusual.\textsuperscript{xix}

In the late nineteenth century there were those in the Buddhist hierarchy who were prepared to countenance such subterfuge. For example, prior to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1894, an agreement was reached between Japanese Army vice-chief of staff, Lieutenant-General Kawakami Sōroku (1848-1899), and Ōtani Kōzui of Kyoto’s Nishi Honganji sect, that all Honganji missions dispatched to China proper, Siberia and Mongolia would assist the military in intelligence-gathering activities.\textsuperscript{xx} Cooperation between the Japanese Army and the Honganji sect continued after the victory over China in 1895.

In 1897, Shimizu Shōgetsu, supposedly a priest from Nishi Honganji temple in Kyoto, arrived in Vladivostok to serve at the sect’s temple there. In the winter of 1899 Shimizu travelled extensively throughout Eastern Siberia, going as far west as Irkutsk before passing through Mongolia to Kirin, Changchun, Manchouli and Maimaicheng in Manchuria, on his return to Vladivostok. In actuality, however, “Shimizu” was the pseudonym of Captain Hanada Nakanosuke (1860-1945), who had been sent secretly to Siberia on the orders of Lieutenant-General Kawakami Sōroku.\textsuperscript{xxi}

While Hanada may have initially carried out his intelligence-gathering duties as directed, by 1899 he appears to have undergone something of a personal crisis of faith. When Ishimitsu Makiyo (1868-1942), later a captain in the Japanese Army and an intelligence agent in Manchuria, arrived in Vladivostok, accompanied by Colonel Tamura Iyozo, later army vice-chief of staff, they found that Hanada had embraced his role too completely. Tamura ordered him back to Japan, but Hanada instead resigned his commission and stayed in Vladivostok. This, however, was not as disastrous as it seems, because when war broke out in 1904, Hanada, on orders from then Lieutenant-General Kodama Gentarō (1852-1906) formed a mounted intelligence and guerilla
organisation which called itself the “Army of Justice” and operated behind the Russian lines in Manchuria.xxii

Although not as dramatic as the case of Hanada, there were other instances, both prior to the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War and during the early stages of the conflict, where military officers or civilian auxiliaries operated behind enemy lines disguised as Buddhist monks. For example, in the period prior to the war, a Japanese colonel, disguised at times as a Buddhist monk and at other times as a Chinese merchant, provided the first authoritative reports of the presence of Russian troops on the Yalu River.xxiii There were also the “special operations teams” (tokubetsu ninmuha) dispatched to carry out a series of attacks against Russia’s principal line of reinforcement, the Trans-Siberian Railway, during the opening phase of the war.

On 10 February 1904, as Japanese forces launched a naval attack against the Russian fleet at Port Arthur, and military operations on land got underway, the Japanese Army General Staff was keenly aware of the need to maintain its strategic advantage in relation to the battlefront, and to deprive Russia of the opportunity to diminish this advantage. Accordingly, “special operations teams” were dispatched.xxiv Forty-seven operatives in total were dispatched by the Army General Staff to gather intelligence, as well as to carry out acts of sabotage on railway and telegraph lines. To enable the “special operations teams” to penetrate Russian-occupied areas, the members were disguised either as Chinese or Mongols, or as priests.xxv Ultimately, the operation was unsuccessful, as none of the teams destroyed any of the designated targets, and at least one team was caught and executed by the Russians.xxvi

The Japanese military, however, continued to use the Buddhist monk as a cover for military intelligence-gathering operations in the decades after the Russo-Japanese War. Western writers prior to and during the Second World War noted the connection between the military and Buddhist orders.xxvii In 1934, for example, the Russian authors
O. Tanin and E. Yohan noted that “religious organisations are extensively utilised at the present time by Japanese imperialism,” as well as that it was a “well-known fact that Otani, the head of one of the largest Buddhist sects, has been given the special task by the Japanese General Staff of directing the work among the Lama priesthood of Inner Mongolia.” The American journalist Haldore Hanson echoed their opinion when he declared that the “Buddhist religion in Japan is reputedly honey-combed with army agents, and it is a known fact that Japanese Buddhists have acted as military spies in China, Annan, Burma, India, Tibet, and the Philippines.” Indeed, some ten years later, when two young Japanese, Kimura Hisao (1921-89) and Nishikawa Kazumi (1918-?) were dispatched in 1943 from Hohhot in Inner Mongolia with orders to travel to Tibet, gathering intelligence on the way, they were disguised as monks. Exactly what the Japanese military hoped to achieve by dispatching Kimura and Nishikawa this late in the war is unclear, but it indicates the adherence to a tried and true method of disguise.

In addition to approving the military’s adoption of Buddhist garb for undercover operations, there were also more concrete ties between the Japanese Army and the Honganji sect, in relation to activities in China proper and Mongolia. One link was a language school established in Kobe by Ōtani Kōzui prior to the Chinese Revolution of 1911, which included army officers among its students. The school, located in the magnificent mansion that Ōtani had constructed on the top of Mount Rokko in Kobe, was staffed by a Mongolian lama. Among the lama’s students was Tachibana Zuichō (1890-1968) together with other priests, many of who were subsequently dispatched by Ōtani to the Chinese continent to search out Buddhist relics.

In addition to the priests, there were also nine young officers of the Japanese Army, whose identities were concealed from the other students, with the young officers being given special symbols in place of their names. The officers apparently studied
Mongolian very hard for the three years that they were at the school until they were able to speak the language fluently.xxxi Unfortunately, given the degree of secrecy surrounding the identities of the army officers at the Ōtani School it has only been possible to positively identify one of the nine officers. This was Hayashi Daihachi (1884-1932), who later served in Harbin and Taonan in Manchuria in 1914, and was attached to the Chita Special Intelligence Agency (tokumu kikan) during the 1918-22 Siberian Intervention.xxxii Established in 1919, the Special Intelligence Agency, according to Ken Kotani, was the equivalent of the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) and as such engaged in “espionage and conspiracy duties.” Kotani further notes that research into the organization is hampered because of the destruction of documents that occurred in the closing months of the Second World War, xxxiii something that also hampers other fields of research.

Ōtani Kōzui and the Japanese military were linked in other ways as well. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Ōtani dispatched a number of young acolytes to the Chinese continent, purportedly in search of Buddhist relics. For example, between August 1902 and March 1904, two young acolytes, Watanabe Tetsushin and Hori Yoshio, were ordered to undertake an exploratory journey through Outer Mongolia and Sinkiang.xxxiv The most famous of the acolytes dispatched by Ōtani, however, was Tachibana Zuichō, who set off in 1908, crisscrossing the region, supposedly in search of Buddhist relics, but more likely gathering intelligence for the Japanese military.xxxv In the course of his wanderings, Tachibana traversed Inner and Outer Mongolia, Sinkiang, Tibet and much of Central Asia, succeeding in visiting Urga, Uliassutai and Kobdo, before venturing into Siberia.xxxvi His travels were reported in both the English-language press in Japan and the Western press.xxxvii According to Peter Hopkirk, Tachibana’s travels also attracted the attention of British military intelligence, which suspected him of being a Japanese naval officer and lodged an official complaint with the Japanese
government when Tachibana approached the border between Kashgar and British India. xxxvii

Ōtani eventually fell from grace in 1914, when, in dire financial straits because of his extravagant lifestyle, he was involved in a land swindle targeting the Imperial family and was removed as chief abbot of Nishi Honganji. xxxix Despite his spectacular fall, Ōtani did not disappear from view, but continued to be consulted by both government and right-wing circles when required. For example, in October 1920, Hara Kei (1856-1921), the prime minister at that time, recorded in his diary a meeting with Ōtani to discuss the impact of Tenrikyō and Ōmotokyo, two of the new religions that had appeared in the nineteenth century, on Japanese society. xl Almost twenty years later, in a book about Ōtani published in 1939, much was made of the part that Ōtani, together with Kawashima Naniwa (1865-1949), an important right-wing figure connected with a number of the Japanese-backed attempts prior to September 1931 to bring the region under direct Japanese control, xli had played in the economic development of Manchuria. xlii The linking of Ōtani with Kawashima is an indication that, despite his attempt to swindle the Imperial family, connections between Ōtani and the Japanese right-wing remained, and indeed, when the right-wing Kokuryūkai (Amur River/Black Dragon Society) produced its history of the events that had preceded the establishment of Manchukuo, the part played by Ōtani and the monks of Honganji was amply covered.

Ōtani also remained active in Japanese schemes on the continent. In late 1923, for example, the press reported that the “proselytizing of the Hongwangji (sic) sect of Buddhists continues vigorously in China,” with plans to build a branch temple at Mukden in Manchuria, in part to support the sect’s operations in Mongolia. xliii The planned temple was a major undertaking, with the proposed cost of construction alone being 300,000 yen (approximately US$145,770), xliv a very sizeable sum at the time. The land for the temple was to be provided free of charge by the South Manchurian Railway
Company. Given that the company was a quasi-government organisation, this can be taken to mean that the sect’s activities in Manchuria had a degree of official approval. Moreover, the report devoted space to the ongoing activities of “ex-Count Otani Kozui,” who was described as an “ardent missionary and wireless amateur.”

Exactly why the newspaper chose to link these two attributes together was not explained, but given Ōtani’s earlier connection to the military, the most likely answer is that the proposed temple was considered to be a cover for intelligence-gathering on the continent. The use of Honganji temples as such was not uncommon, as discussed earlier in the examination of the use of the temples by military officers disguised as monks. There were also, however, instances where monks acted as intelligence operatives, as can be illustrated by considering the career of Ōta Kakumin.

**Ōta Kakumin and the Vladivostok Honganji Mission**

Born in 1866, the career of Nishi Honganji priest Ōta Kakumin shows the complexity one encounters when trying to determine exactly which individuals connected with the Kyoto sect were involved. In his brief examination of Ōta’s life, John J. Stephen, notes that as well as being a Buddhist priest, before he departed to serve at the Honganji mission in Vladivostok in 1904, Ōta studied Russian with Araki Sadao (1877-1966), the future army minister and proponent of the “active northern strategy” and in the 1930s the central figure of the “Imperial Way Movement” (kōdōha), at the Tokyo School of Foreign Languages in 1902, before recording that Ōta eventually died in Inner Mongolia. This brief sketch misses much of the colour of Ōta’s life.

Ōta was the second son of the chief monk of the Hōzenji temple, in Yokkaichi, a small town not far from Nagoya. This temple was associated with the Jōdo Shinshū Honganji sect. With the premature death of his older brother, Ōta seemed destined to become the chief monk on his father’s death. Ōta, however, later wrote in his 1939
memoirs, *Shibiria kaikyō no omou* (Memoirs of the Siberian Mission), that he was inspired to open a temple in Siberia because of the successful ride from Berlin to Vladivostok in 1892-3 by the Japanese Army officer Fukushima Yasumasa, although Ōta neglected to explain why this was so inspirational. The most likely reason was that, like most Japanese at the time, Ōta was swept up in the celebrations surrounding Fukushima’s successful completion of his lone ride, something that made Fukushima “an overnight hero and a symbol of the new, adventurous Japanese male.”

Prior to achieving his goal of opening a temple in Siberia, however, Ōta was required to do his military service. Unfortunately, Ōta was a less than exemplary soldier, being tried and jailed for impersonating a sergeant when attempting to return to the base late in October 1894. He was released in March 1895, at the very end of the Sino-Japanese War, and probably saw little, if any, service during the conflict. If he did serve, then it is most likely that Ōta served as a Buddhist priest attached to an army unit. The role of the Buddhist priests accompanying the troops into the field was threefold; the priests were to give “morale building: talks to the soldiers, to conduct funerals for those killed in battle and, in cases of death, to notify the families back in Japan.”

Writing about what he observed during the Second Sino-Japanese War some forty years later, Haldore Hanson commented that “no battlefield in China is complete without a black-robed Japanese priest hurrying from corpse to corpse blessing the soul of each soldier in a brief Buddhist “mass”. The priest is a fixture in every Japanese Army unit …” and it is likely that Buddhist priests fulfilled much the same role during the First Sino-Japanese War. While Buddhist priests served much the same function as military chaplains do in all armed forces, as noted previously Hanson strongly believed that the Buddhist religion was riddled with army agents, making all Buddhist priests suspect. Moreover, Hanson was not alone in believing this, given the widespread
belief prior to the Second World War that most Japanese travelling outside of Japan were potential intelligence officers.\textsuperscript{lv}

No matter how Ōta felt about his time as a soldier, in June 1899 he penned an opinion piece entitled “Kaishi seido kaikaku shigi” (A Personal Opinion about the Reform of the NCO [non-commissioned officer] System).\textsuperscript{lv} Although this might seem a rather unusual topic for one of the priesthood, it was most likely inspired by what he had observed during his time in the army. Ōta obviously drew on his own experience to write a critique of the NCO system, noting that under the existing system the lowest social strata of the Japanese Army, those under the NCOs, were in a “position of misfortune” (fukō no chi-i) and he proposed concrete and precise suggestions for reform. Ōta tempered his critique, however, by calling for an examination of the NCO system in other armies of the day, to ensure that the Japanese system retained its “special spiritual quality” (seishin kōzō no tokushitsu). Ōta’s critique proposed the establishment of places of worship at military schools to facilitate this, something that was subsequently done.\textsuperscript{lvi} Apparently, despite his less than stellar military career, Ōta’s critique made an impression on the military hierarchy, given that they subsequently implemented his proposal.

In 1900, Ōta enrolled at the Tokyo School of Foreign Languages to study Russian.\textsuperscript{lvi} This was no doubt done to allow him to better proselytize while serving at the Honganji temple in Vladivostok. Among his classmates, however, were an interesting assortment of individuals, including another Honganji member, Akegarasu Haya, no doubt also learning the language so that he could proselytize; the Russian language specialist Yasugi Sadatoshi (1876-1966), who subsequently taught at Tokyo Imperial University; and the army officer Araki Sadao,\textsuperscript{lviii} the proponent of what Stephan terms the “active northern strategy.” This mix of monks, academics and military figures is an indication that the Russian language attracted a diverse array of
Japanese society, most likely because in some areas Russia was viewed as a potential foe.

In addition to his language studies, Ōta found the time to attend functions actively promoting the military, as well as to write on the subject. For example, in March 1901 he attended a conscription meeting in Tokyo, a meeting that was also attended by Hirao Nobutoshi of the army; Suzuki Kantarō (1867-1948), a naval officer who later served as Grand Chamberlain to the Emperor Shōwa and was Japan’s Prime Minister at the time of the 1945 surrender; and Okumura Ioko (1845-1907) of the Aikoku fujinkai (Patriotic Women’s Association). The last, Okumura, had a connection to the Honganji sect, having been among a party dispatched by the sect to North China to help wounded Japanese soldiers during the Boxer Rebellion, and to ascertain how the welfare of the troops could be improved. On her return to Japan, Okumura founded the Aikoku fujinkai. Moreover, of the three, Ōta apparently knew Suzuki well, the two men having known one another since their youth. Clearly, Ōta moved in exclusive circles.

The following year, the speech that Ōta had given at the conscription meeting was published with the title “Kairiku heieki dan” (Speaking on Military Service). Although it is not clear why, given the speech had been presented to a conservative audience, when it was published the authorities chose to censor one part of the speech. According to Matsumoto Ikuko, the reason for the censorship was that Ōta had apparently used his own experiences, from his time serving with the army and since as a monk, to speak frankly and bluntly to the assembled conscripts. In all likelihood, given that Ōta had previously called for the reform of the NCO system, Ōta again voiced his criticism of the existing system.

His outspokenness did not impede his career, however, and in January 1903, his Russian language studies completed, Ōta received orders from Ōtani Kōzui, the head of Nishi Honganji, to take charge of the branch temple of the order in Vladivostok.
Matsumoto’s assertion that Ōta was to actually open a branch temple in Vladivostok seems incorrect, given that when Captain Hanada Nakanosuke had been dispatched to Vladivostok in 1897 he had served at the sect’s temple there. Ōta’s departure to Vladivostok was deemed newsworthy, however, with the *Asahi shinbun* drawing its reader’s attention to the dispatch of Ōta to Vladivostok among the monks that the Honganji sect sent to Manchuria and Russia on this occasion. Ōta was in Vladivostok six months later, in February 1904, when the Japanese Navy’s surprise attack on Port Arthur heralded the opening of the Russo-Japanese War. When the Russian authorities repatriated the Japanese residents in Vladivostok, Ōta refused to board the last vessel to sail from Vladivostok returning Japanese residents to Japan. Instead he returned to the interior of the Maritime Provinces and gathered together the Japanese who were scattered throughout the province. Exactly how Ōta was able to convince the Russians that he be allowed to do this is unclear, but he eventually located some eight hundred fellow countrymen and women, who were subsequently repatriated to Japan, via Germany, arriving in Nagasaki in December 1904. Even before he returned to Japan, the press was reporting on Ōta’s mission, detailing his tramp through the Russian Far East together with the numbers of Japanese that he had been able to gather.

Despite having been away from Japan for more than a year, Ōta remained in the country for little more than a month, including a trip to Kyoto to report to Ōtani Kōzui, before departing for the continent to serve as Buddhist chaplain with the 13th Infantry Division, where he met with General Nogi Maresuke (1849-1912). The service that Ōta and others like him gave during the war was subsequently recognised by the Emperor Meiji, who, in 1907 granted Ōtani Kōzui an audience and declared that, “during the war of 1904-5 you, in accordance with the purposes of your ancestors, stimulated the public spirit of the adherents of your religion. You further exercised your
energies in encouraging the morale of the troops by sending your priests to the front. We greatly appreciate your arduous service."\textsuperscript{lxx}

With Japan’s defeat of Russia, Ōta was able to return to Vladivostok where, according to Stephan, he “demurely blended philanthropy and espionage.”\textsuperscript{lxxi} During the next decade and a half, Ōta remained in Vladivostok, attached to the Honganji temple there. While the temple had been established just before the turn of the century, it appears that it was not until May 1915 that a more permanent structure was constructed, with the groundbreaking attended by an array of dignitaries, including Ōtani Kōzui, who, despite his fall from grace the previous year, was still actively connected with the sect’s continental operations.\textsuperscript{lxii} Some three years later, in January 1918, with the dispatch of Japanese troops to the Russian Far East as part of the Siberian Intervention, Ōta was appointed the director of army missions in the region.\textsuperscript{lxiii} In this role, Ōta, under orders from the army commander, formed a “consolation group” (imondan) for servicemen and travelled throughout the region, including to Amur, Chita and Irkutsk.\textsuperscript{lxiv} Ōta remained in this position until the withdrawal of the Japanese contingent in 1922, when he oversaw the construction of a Monument to the War Dead, both Japanese and Russian, in Vladivostok.\textsuperscript{lxv}

With the withdrawal of the Japanese Army from the Russian Far East, one would have expected the work of the Honganji mission to come to an end. Ōta, however, remained in Vladivostok for another nine years, until the Soviet authorities eventually refused to renew his visa in 1931.\textsuperscript{lxvi} During this period Ōta found time to write a book about his work in Vladivostok with \textit{Roshia monogatari} (Tales of Russia) being published in December 1925.\textsuperscript{lxvii} Ōta’s book covered two parts of his life in the Russian Far East; the first detailed Ōta’s trek following the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War to gather the Japanese residents in the region; while the second longer part dealt with Ōta’s service with the army “consolation group” during the Siberian Intervention. In the
latter, Ōta included a photo of himself preaching to a group of Japanese soldiers at Irkutsk,\textsuperscript{lviii} which illustrates the kind of work that the “consolation group” carried out. The book sold well and was reprinted twice in quick succession in January 1926.

An extract from Ōta’s book appeared in the English-language journal \textit{Young East} the following year. The journal was produced by the Young East society, formed in Tokyo in 1925, which was active in the discussion and dissemination of a new, socially engaged humanitarian Buddhism.\textsuperscript{lxix} The \textit{Young East} extract first covered Ōta’s decision to remain in Vladivostok in February 1905, at the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War, then recounted how he overcame “innumerable difficulties,” but somehow managed to succeed in “collecting some 800 Japanese scattered in different parts of the [Maritime] province.”\textsuperscript{lxx} The remainder of the extract was given over to the tale of how Ōta, while serving with the consolation group in 1918 had acted charitably to an elderly Russian woman, giving her a one hundred yen note, a considerable sum of money at the time, only to later discover that she was the mother of the young Russian woman who had brought Ōta warm milk when he had been imprisoned during the Russo-Japanese War some fifteen years before.\textsuperscript{lxxi} One has the feeling that \textit{Young East} specifically chose this story as it illustrated the way in which acts of charity were returned in full. In contrast, the extract that Matsumoto includes in her examination of Ōta’s life during the 1918-22 Siberian Intervention focuses more on the struggle between the Whites and Bolsheviks.\textsuperscript{lxxii}

With the refusal by the Soviet authorities to renew his visa, Ōta was forced to return to Japan, but before he did so, in the summer of 1931, he travelled to Moscow and Leningrad.\textsuperscript{lxxxiii} It was while he was in Moscow, according to Matsumoto, that Ōta met with the Soviet leader, Josef Stalin (1879-1953).\textsuperscript{lxxxiv} The significance of Ōta’s meeting with Stalin was such that when Ōta died in 1944 this meeting was held to be one of the three most important events of Ōta’s life, the other two being his long service
in Vladivostok and his decision to travel to Inner Mongolia in 1936. Neither the story published at the time of his death nor the recent study by Matsumoto explain the circumstances surrounding this meeting, but a meeting between the Russian dictator and a lowly Buddhist priest raises a number of questions that perhaps further research will answer. One conclusion that can be drawn from the meeting is that Ōta, for whatever reason, was regarded by the Russian authorities as a figure of some importance and one that they felt it was necessary to acknowledge. Following his return to Japan, in November 1931, Ōta wrote a series of articles about his experiences in Russia in the religious journal Daijō, including Rēningrādo nenbutsu nikki (Leningrad Buddhist prayer diary), chiefly about what he had observed in connection with Buddhism during his time Leningrad. In this Ōta commented on the small number of Buddhists who remained in the city and continued to practice despite being monitored and oppressed by the authorities. Ōta’s observations about the persecution of Buddhism in the Soviet Union no doubt caught the attention of those in the Japanese military who were looking to woo the Buddhist inhabitants of the regions adjacent to Manchuria, and this example would have allowed them to present Japan as the protector of the faith, while declaring that the Soviets were the enemy of Buddhism. The promotion of Japan as the protector of Buddhism and of other faiths was actively encouraged by elements of the Japanese military, particularly in the 1930s, as will be discussed in more detail below.

Although now aged in his late sixties, Ōta continued to be associated with the fostering of better relations with other proponents of Buddhism in the region. For instance, in April 1935, when the Inner Mongolian Living Buddha of Mulimiao visited Japan, Ōta escorted him to Ise Shrine. In return, Ōta received an invitation from an advisor to this venerable dignitary to visit Mongolia, but initially declined. The Living Buddha’s visit to Japan attracted widespread attention with the Japanese press
noting that, in addition to holding a service for the “saint priest Myojo … the father of present Count Kozui Otani,” among the places the Living Buddha planned to visit while in Tokyo were the “War Office, the General Staff Office and the Foreign Office,” an indication that the purpose of the Living Buddha’s visit was also political in nature. Indeed, the story concluded that the Living Buddha hoped “that Japanese would go to the open areas of Manchuria and Mongolia and settle there permanently.” The Japanese authorities no doubt welcomed the Living Buddha’s endorsement of Japanese settlement in the region.

As Narangoa Li has observed, during the 1930s the Japanese authorities made a conscious effort to woo Inner Mongolian Buddhist leaders, recognising the influence of the Buddhist monks over the princes of Inner Mongolia and believing that serious resistance by the princes could be avoided if the monks remained sympathetic to Japan, thus the pronouncements by the Living Buddha of Mulimiao would have been accorded maximum publicity. Japanese attempts to woo the Mongols, as well as practitioners of other faiths than Buddhism in the border region between Republican China and the Soviet Union, were not unknown at the time. As noted earlier, Soviet historians Tanin and Yohan commented on Japanese ambitions in Mongolia, specifically naming Ōta Kōzui’s part in these ambitions and also drawing attention to the number of Japanese religious sects active in “furthering the penetration of Japanese influence in Korea, Manchuria, Mongolia, China, and the Pacific Islands.” The pair also noted that “among the non-Buddhist population of Inner Mongolia and Manchuria (i.e., Mussulmans (sic), Confucians, and others) use is made of the Tenro sect.”

Moreover, along with the various attempts made by the Japanese authorities to woo Buddhist groups on the Chinese continent, from the 1890s onwards there had also been a concerted effort, both by private individuals, often those connected with Pan-Asianist groups or the Kokuryūkai, as well as by the Japanese authorities, especially
elements in the military, to forge closer ties with the Muslim world.\textsuperscript{xcii} This continued into the twentieth century and by the 1930s the Japanese military were supporting Muslim separatists in Northwest China and funding conferences, both in Japan and in Manchuria, that were attended by Turkis nationals, the blanket term applied to the various peoples of Western and Central Asia, and by Chinese Muslim separatists.\textsuperscript{xciii} The apparent objective in cultivating the Muslim population was, in part, to separate the majority of Western and Central Asia from the control of both the Chinese Republic and the Soviet Union. This was to be achieved through the creation of a huge “Central Asian Muslim Empire,” a nominally independent state under Japanese control, which was to include Russian Central Asia up to the Urals, the Chinese provinces of Kansu and Sinkiang, and Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{xciv} Whether or not the Japanese military really did expect to be able to create a “Central Asian Muslim Empire,” there was a definite preoccupation with the apparent threat from the Soviet Union. Moreover, the benefit of such an “empire,” especially one established under Japanese sponsorship, was that the new “empire” could act as a buffer zone against Soviet Communist infiltration of China and Korea and also serve as a jumping-off point for a Japanese military assault on the Soviet Union, something that remained a serious possibility until at least July 1941.\textsuperscript{xcv}

Finally, it should not be forgotten that in the mid-1920s Deguchi Onisaburō (1871-1948), leader of Ōmotokyō, one of the “new religions” that had emerged in Japan following the Meiji Restoration, had taken himself and a handle of his followers off to the Chinese continent in an attempt to “unify Sinkiang, Tibet, India and all of China under one religion, resulting in an East Asian Federation.”\textsuperscript{xcvi} Deguchi’s attempt, which was badly planned and poorly executed, brought together an eclectic mix of his Japanese followers, some of whom were former military men, together with Manchurian bandits and Chinese religious adherents, among the last being members of the Chinese Fyflot Association, a humanitarian group in North China that had ties to the Japanese
Deguchi had, as he was willing to admit in his account of his Mongolian adventures, support from elements of the Japanese military, with a Special Intelligence Agency major-general having been ordered to Mongolia by the Army General Staff to act as liaison between Deguchi and the Chinese. Moreover, in the press reports covering Deguchi’s trial after his return to Japan in 1924, much was made of the “leading politicians of Japan, bandit leaders of Manchuria, and distinguished people of China” who had supported Deguchi, although the exact nature of Deguchi’s high-level political support in Japan was never explained. What all of these examples illustrate is that the Japanese military were willing to use any means to extend the country’s sphere of influence in North China and the adjoining regions and that it did not restrict itself to the use of Buddhism as a means to do this.

Ōta, despite initially refusing the invitation to visit the Living Buddha, had by March 1935 decided that he would travel to Inner Mongolia, his purpose being to revive Mongolian Lamaism, as it was “endangered by religious persecution orchestrated by the Soviet Union.” His departure, however, was delayed by some months, and it was not until early July the following year that the Japanese press carried reports of Ōta’s intention to travel to Mongolia for the purpose of “reviving Lamaism” (ramakyo no fukkō). Moreover, as an indication of how highly Ōta’s visit to Inner Mongolia was regarded, his childhood friend, Suzuki Kantarō, now Grand Chamberlain to the Emperor Shōwa, arranged for a gift from the emperor to be presented to Ōta prior to his departure. The granting of such a prestigious honour, both an audience and a gift from the emperor, demonstrates that Ōta’s journey was sanctioned at the highest level.

This conjecture is confirmed, in part, by the fact that Ōta’s journey attracted the attention of the Chinese press, even before he arrived on the Chinese continent. For example, in early July 1936, the North China Daily News reported that, “the Rev. Dr. Kakumin Ohta [Ōta] … an intimate friend of Koki Hirota [then Japan’s Prime
Minister],” planned to journey to Inner Mongolia to “revive Buddhism and to combat the evils of atheism,” at the request of the Living Buddha of Molimiao [Mulimiao], eastern Mongolia.\textsuperscript{ciii} While the description of Ōta as an “intimate friend” of the Japanese prime minister by the Chinese press could be taken as hyperbole, it does indicate that the Chinese press at least regarded Ōta’s journey as having a degree of official sanction as well as believing that Ōta himself moved in high circles. Despite being only two short paragraphs in length, the article also found space to mention that Ōta was well-known for remaining behind in Vladivostok during the Russo-Japanese War “disguised as a Korean,”\textsuperscript{civ} implying that there might have been an ulterior motive for his remaining that was not connected with his priestly duties.

Following his arrival in Inner Mongolia, Ōta apparently remained in the region until his death in November 1944 at the Jining temple at Mulimiao in Hsingan province at the age of seventy-nine.\textsuperscript{cv} As a part of his service at the temple, Ōta recognised that in addition to improving the spiritual lives of the Mongols, the population’s physical wellbeing was also important. Accordingly, he established a clinic that provided basic health care for the local population, including the treatment of eye diseases and inoculations against infectious diseases.\textsuperscript{cvi} In some respects, Ōta appears to have been following the example of the Zenrin kyōkai (Good Neighbour Association), the semi-official Japanese humanitarian organisation with links to the military that provided medical assistance and educational opportunities to the Mongols and Hui (Han-Chinese Muslims) living on the fringe of the Chinese Republic between 1933 and 1945.\textsuperscript{cvii} Moreover, Ōta wrote a number of pieces that were subsequently published in Japan, including a piece about life at Mulimiao, a “Mongolian tale” (Mōko shōwa) and a “One line poem about General Nogi” (Nogi shōgun no ichitsuishi).\textsuperscript{cviii} Despite his advanced years, there has been some conjecture as to exactly how Ōta died, with Matsumoto
noting that the various theories surrounding Ōta’s death include poisoning by partisans, suicide in the face of Japan’s impending defeat or death as a result of illness.\textsuperscript{cix}

It should also be noted that Matsumoto Ikuko has challenged John J. Stephan’s conclusion that Ōta was in any way connected with espionage, but ignores the evidence contained in the Kokuryūkai’s own history. Published between 1933 and 1936, the massive eighteen-hundred page, three-volume work constitutes one of the most important contemporary sources available on topics such as unofficial Japanese involvement in the various schemes supported by elements of the military to extend Japanese influence on the continent. While the intended audience and timing of publication of this work need to be recognised, as is acknowledged by the historian Nakami Tatsuo,\textsuperscript{cx} to discount the information it provides would be extremely shortsighted.

The part that Ōta played in Japan’s imperial adventures, both at the time of the 1904-5 Russo-Japanese War and later during the Siberian Intervention, forms part of a longer chapter in volume one detailing the part played by Nishi Honganji in Vladivostok, entitled “The activities of our patriots and military men in the Vladivostok district” (\textit{Urachō ni okeru waga shishi oyobi gunjin no kōdō}).\textsuperscript{cxi} The title makes no mention of Buddhism or monks, but simply classed those individuals dispatched by Nishi Honganji to work in Vladivostok as “patriots” (\textit{shishi}) and lumps them together with the military men who operated in the region, as if they were one and the same.

The chapter begins by documenting the establishment of the Nishi Honganji temple in 1892, noting the dispatch of Shimizu Shōgetsu to serve there, then going on to discuss the part played by Uchida Ryōhei, later one of the founders of the Kokuryūkai, and others who worked closely with Shimizu, by this point revealed to be Captain Hanada Nakanosuke, in gathering vital intelligence on the region.\textsuperscript{cxii} The section about Ōta’s decision to remain behind at the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War makes much
of his selfless determination to remain and to rescue his fellow countrymen still in the interior of the Maritime Province. In the way that the material was presented it was clear that Kokuryūkai wanted its readers to see Ōta’s decision in 1904 to remain behind in Vladivostok as similar to the service rendered by Hanada Nakanosuke, Uchida Ryōhei and others a decade earlier, and to draw the conclusion that Ōta was also engaged in gathering vital intelligence on the region.

Moreover, references to Ōtani Kōzui, Ōta’s superior, and the part that monks from Nishi and Higashi Honganji played in Japan’s imperial adventures are scattered through the three volumes. For example, in volume one there is also a chapter, entitled “The activities of our religious men in China” (Shina ni okeru waga shūkyōka no kōdō), which begins with the dispatch of Ogurusu Kōchō to Mongolia in 1873 before then covering Kawaguchi Ekai (1866-1945) and his successful entry into Tibet in 1898, presenting both achievements as significant steps in the expansion of Japan’s sphere of influence. The chapter finishes with an extensive list of the places visited by Tachibana Zuichō as he crisscrossed the length and breath of Inner and Outer Mongolia, Sinkiang, Tibet and Central Asia on orders from Ōtani Kōzui. Of interest here is that the title of this chapter stands in contrast to the chapter that documents the activities of the Nishi Honganji monks in Vladivostok. In this instance the reader is told at the outset that the chapter is about “religious men” (shūkyōka), unlike the title of the chapter dealing with operations in Vladivostok where the monks are classed as “patriots” (shishi) along with the “military men” (gunjin). From this differentiation there is a sense that the Kokuryūkai, while it wanted its readers to view the likes of Ogurusu, Kawaguchi and Tachibana as “religious men” (shūkyōka), albeit patriotic religious men, saw Ōta as one of the “patriots and military men” (shishi oyobi gunjin), which would suggest that Ōta’s activities were not limited to merely the religious.
In volume three, which is primarily composed of short biographical sketches devoted to those that the Kokuryūkai called “pioneer patriots” (senkaku shishi), are listed some of the monks dispatched by Higashi Honganji, including Ishikawa Butai (1839-1931), a compatriot of Ogurusu, who was dispatched to Korea and China and later associated with the sect’s East Asian policy; and Hasumoto Kensei (1868-?) also dispatched to Korea. Even Ogurusu Kōchō warranted a short entry, as did several other monks whose activities the Kokuryūkai deemed worthy. Throughout the Kokuryūkai history the monks are presented as being active participants in the operations of the association to expand Japan’s empire. The ties between Ōtani and the Japanese military are well documented, and the involvement of Ōta and others like him in intelligence-gathering operations was well known in the years before the Second World War.

There is also the question of Ōta’s decision to travel to Inner Mongolia, or more accurately to Hsingan, the Mongol province of Manchukuo, in 1936. Manchukuo was under the control of the Japanese Kwantung Army and for Ōta to travel to and reside for an extended period of time in the country would have required the approval of the military. No doubt the Japanese authorities saw in Ōta an individual who could play a part in what Narangoa has termed the “conscious effort to woo Inner Mongolian Buddhist leaders.” Furthermore, as noted earlier in the article, Araki Sadao, an important figure in the high command in the 1920s and 1930s had been among Ōta’s classmates at the Tokyo School of Foreign Languages in 1902, while among his childhood friends Ōta could count Suzuki Kantarō, a former admiral, and by the 1930s Grand Chamberlain to the Emperor Shōwa, links that would have served to facilitate Ōta’s entry into Manchukuo. Even Matsumoto concedes, based on the research done by Tsukinoki Mizuo, that there must have been a link between Ōta and the Japanese
military authorities, because if there were not it would have been quite impossible for Ōta to have travelled to Mongolia.\textsuperscript{cxx}

**Conclusion**

While not actively involved in any acts of violence, the intelligence-gathering operations that the monks of Nishi Honganji undertook on orders of Ōtani Kōzui were important to the Japanese military as it sought to combat its rivals and carve out a significant sphere of influence on the Chinese continent. The agreement reached between Japanese Army vice-chief of staff, Lieutenant-General Kawakami Sōroku and Ōtani Kōzui, prior to the 1894-5 Sino-Japanese War, that all Honganji missions dispatched to China proper, Siberia and Mongolia would assist the military in intelligence-gathering activities, no doubt provided the Japanese military with much needed intelligence information. Moreover, the journeys undertaken by the young acolytes dispatched by Ōtani to Inner and Outer Mongolia, Sinkiang, Tibet and much of Central Asia in the first decade of the twentieth century presumably also furnished the military with vital intelligence. Lastly, there is Ōta Kakumin’s lengthy stay in Vladivostok and his activities, both at the time of the Russo-Japanese War when he was able to remain behind to traverse the Russian Far East in search of his fellow country men and women, and the fact that he was able to remain there after Japan’s withdrawal following the end of the Siberian Intervention in 1922, that must have been seen as heaven sent by those in the military who desired up to date information on what was happening in the region.

The part that individuals, among them Ōtani Kōzui, Ōta Kakumin and the monks who were dispatched by Nishi and Higashi Honganji to Inner and Outer Mongolia, Sinkiang, Tibet and much of Central Asia, played in Japan’s imperial adventures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries warrants closer scrutiny and it is hoped that
this article will serve to generate further research into the part that Buddhist monks played in Japan’s continental adventures, helping to give a fuller picture of the way in which elements within Japanese Buddhism aided and abetted the military prior to 1945.

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ix Welch, 162.

x Victoria, *Zen War Stories*, 92.


xxiii Warners, 168-9.


xxxii Kuzū, vol. 2, 748; for a summary of Hayashi’s career, see Hata, 117.


xxxvi Kuzū, vol. 1, 509.


xli See Boyd, Faith, Race and Strategy, 42-5, 76-80, 94-5.

xlii Tanaka, 130.


“Notes of the Week,” 842.


Matsumoto, Ōta Kakumin, 21, 175. See also J. Boyd, “‘This stalwart fellow of five lands and two seas . . .’: The Life of Fukushima Yasumasa,” War & Society 30(3) (October 2011): 214-25.


Victoria, Zen War Stories, 150.

Hanson, 120-1.

Hanson, 199.


Matsumoto, Ōta Kakumin, 284.

Matsumoto, Ōta Kakumin, 25.

Matsumoto, Ōta Kakumin, 22.


lx Matsumoto, Ōta Kakumin, 23.

lx Matsumoto, Ōta Kakumin, 285.

lxii Matsumoto, Ōta Kakumin, 25-6, 121.

lxiii Matsumoto, Ōta Kakumin, 23.

lxiv Ōhama, 102-3; Anderson, 82-3.

lxv “Manshū hakensō no shuppatsu,” [The departure of a delegation of monks to Manchuria] Asahi shinbun, 1 September 1903, 3.


lxvii Matsumoto, Ōta Kakumin, 28-9.

lxviii “Tekichi ni nokoreru waga sōryo,” [Our monk allowed to stay in enemy territory] [Our comrades left in Russia have been repatriated] Asahi shinbun, 10 November 1904, 3; “Rokoku zanryū dōhō hikiageru,” Asahi shinbun, 14 November 1904, 1; “Honpōjin Roryō hikiage jōkyō,” [The circumstances surrounding the repatriation of Japanese from Russian territory] Yomiuri shinbun, 23 November 1904, 2.
lxix Matsumoto, Ōta Kakumin, 29.
lxi Stephan, 78.
lxii Matsumoto, Ōta Kakumin, 285.
lxiii Kuzū, vol. 1, 604.
lxiv “Ōta-shi i-shi yuki,” [The Reverend Ōta is going to Irkutsk] Asahi shinbun, 23 November 1918, 4; Matsumoto, “Religious Practice,” 163.
lxv Matsumoto, Ōta Kakumin, 286.
lxvi Matsumoto, “Religious Practice,” 164.
lxvii K. Ōta, Roshia monogatari [Tales of Russia] (Tōkyō: Hinoeuma shuppansha, 1925).
lxviii Ōta, photo opposite, 132.
lxx “Romantic Experience,” 328.
lxxii Matsumoto, Ōta Kakumin, 196-208.
lxxiii Matsumoto, Ōta Kakumin, 286.
lxxiv Matsumoto, “Religious Practice,” 164.
lxxvi Matsumoto, “Religious Practice,” 164-5; Matsumoto, Ōta Kakumin, 287.

Tanin and Yohan, 60.

Tanin and Yohan, 60.


xcviii Deguchi, 219.


c Matsumoto, “Religious Practice,” 152.


cv Matsumoto, *Ōta Kakumin*, 44.


cviii Matsumoto, *Ōta Kakumin*, 287.


cxvii See Anderson.

cxviii Narangoa, 494.
