

Examining the Perceptions and Responses to the Concept of the “Yellow Race” in Meiji Japan: A Case Study

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Abstract. In 1904, the Russo-Japanese War broke out. The factors that contributed to the outbreak of the war included the competition between Russia and Japan over spheres of influence, as well as the perspective of the "yellow-white conflict." This calls for research on Japan's perception of the concept of the "yellow race" and its reaction to it during the Meiji period. The concept of the "yellow race" was introduced to Japan as part of the modern Western "knowledge," which led to different perceptions. However, especially after the First Sino-Japanese War, the conflict between the concept of "white superiority and yellow inferiority," typified by the "Yellow Peril," and the concept of "Japan the civilized and the West the barbarian," implied in Japan's anti-foreign (jōi) movement, intensified and finally became irreconcilable.

Keywords: “Yellow race”, white race, Meiji Japan, The Russo-Japanese War, Japanized Sinocentrism.

1. Introduction

Since the mid twentieth century, both the Chinese and the Japanese have been categorized by the West as "yellow races," both once regarded as "Yellow Peril" in the past. The Treaty of Shimonoseki, which Japan signed, allowed it to obtain substantial reparations from China in exchange for ceding territories and numerous privileges. However, in this process, Japan turned against the interests of the Western powers in China, which prompted Germany, France, and Russia to step in and force Japan to return the Liaodong Peninsula. Not defeated China, but rather the rising Japan was considered the "Yellow Peril" at that time.

Japan naturally did not accept this label, but its perception of and reaction to the concept of the "yellow race" was complicated and worthy of in-depth study. The outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War was not only related to the competition between Japan and Russia for the sphere of influence in Northeast China and the Korean Peninsula, but also related to the conflict between the two countries' concepts of race. For a deeper understanding of Japan's perception of and reaction to the concept of the "yellow race," it is necessary to look at the entire Meiji period, which was characterized by capitalist reforms and retained a large number of feudal remnants, rather than limiting it to the decade between the First Sino-Japanese War and the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War.

This paper will examine Japan's perception of and reaction to the concept of the "yellow race" with reference to important primary sources and relevant previous research, focusing on the Meiji period, and try to discuss the reasons why Japan rejected the label "Yellow Peril" and pursued equality with other powers while oppressing China and Korea, which were also members of the "yellow race."

2. Literature Review

For a long time, it has been common knowledge or fact that people from East Asian countries such as China and Japan belong to the "yellow (Mongolian) race". However, according to Michael Keevak, at the beginning of the Age of Exploration, the West almost unanimously described East Asians as "white" rather than "yellow." When German anthropologist and physician Blumenbach established the "Mongoloid" category of human races at the end of the 18th century, East Asian peoples' skin color was first identified as "yellow." By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a number of "scientific evidence" pieces led to the widespread acceptance of East Asian skin color as "yellow" as a "fact"

[1]. According to Yasuko Takezawa, the earliest known person to introduce the classification of human races as knowledge in Japan was Watanabe Kazan, a Confucian and scholar of Dutch learning (Rangaku) in the late Edo period. Watanabe's "knowledge" of the classification of human races is mentioned in his "Shinki Ron" and Gaikoku Jijō Sho (The Book of Foreign Things) [2]. Takezawa also examined the contents of various Japanese geography textbooks on "race categorization" from the early Meiji period to the late Meiji period. She points out that not all of these textbooks categorized the Japanese as "yellow (Mongoloid) race," such as Joshi Chiri Kyōkasho: Chūgaku Kyōiku, which categorized the Japanese as Aryan, a member of the "white race" [2].

Michael Keevak also argues that the notion of the Japanese as a "yellow race" was met with resentment in Japan because it categorized China and Japan together as a "yellow race" at a time when many Japanese were not willing to be associated with China [1]. Keevak cites Taguchi Ukichi's statement, "The notoriety of the Japanese race as yellow shall be rejected [1]."

After the First Sino-Japanese War, Kaiser Wilhelm II set off a round of "Yellow Peril." According to LI Kaihang, in the discussion in Meiji Japan about "Yellow Peril," Japan had two competing sides: to opposed racism and to use "Yellow Peril" to rebuild its colonial order [3]. With reference to Mori Ōgai, LI observes that despite his critique of "Aryan superiority," Mori continued to discriminate against the "black race" [3]. Michael Weiner elaborates on the "Japanese race" and "Japanese nation" in modern times. Weiner describes the invention of the concepts of "Japanese race" and "Japanese nation", and points out that under the influence of Social Darwinism, the racial view of Japan has been stratified: on the one hand, it competed with the "white race;" and on the other hand, it "eliminated" other "inferior" races [4]. This analysis is in line with the underlying logical structure of the Japanese racial outlook.

The four studies mentioned above deal with the perception and discourse of "race" from the Age of Exploration to the Meiji period. The former three of them explain the formation of the concept of "yellow race," the perception of it, and the response to it in modern Japan from the perspectives of modern anthropology, geography textbooks of the Meiji period, and "Yellow Peril" after the First Sino-Japanese War, while Weiner gives a hierarchical structure of the concept of race in modern Japan. These studies have helped to improve the understanding of the concept of "yellow race," but they have not yet taken into account the co-existence of feudal conservatism and modern openness in modern Japan. This paper will look at how the concept "yellow race" was seen and responded to in modern Japan throughout the Meiji era, which was marked by both openness and conservatism.

3. “Yellow Peril” and “Developing Asia”: A Partially Fulfilled Prophecy

The Russo-Japanese War began in 1904. From the standpoint of international relations realism, the battle between Russia and Japan over the Liaodong Peninsula as a sphere of influence was all but inevitable. The Otsu Incident, which took place in 1891 prior to the First Sino-Japanese War and severely damaged relations between the two nations, occurred when Tsarist Crown Prince Nicholas II was stabbed and injured by a policeman named Tsuda Sanzō while he was visiting Japan. Nicholas II succeeded to the Tsar's throne in 1894, and the following year, together with Germany and France, forced Japan to return the Liaodong Peninsula, which had been ceded by the Qing court. Though deeply unhappy, Japan was constrained by its comprehensive national strength at that time and had to “endure hardship now for the sake of later revenge (gashin shōtan)."

After the First Sino-Japanese War, when Kaiser Wilhelm II advocated the "Yellow Peril" and called for the unity of the Western countries to cope with the rise of Japan, and after the intervention of the three countries in the return of the Liaodong Peninsular, under the stimulation of the "Yellow Peril," Pan-Asianism became one of the most important social trends in Japan once again. In 1898, Takayama Chogyū (Rinjiro), editor-in-chief of the famous magazine Taiyō (The Sun), published an editorial entitled "The Far East Issue as a Race Rivalry," which stated: "Should not our Japan and the Chinese Empire promise to embrace each other, support each other along, and share a similar destiny as one of the remaining Turanian nations in the world? China, our lone neighbor and sibling... Oops!

By placing China in the half-dead, didn't we cut off our arms? Considering this, our once-proud battle against the Qing has now turned into a rare Far Eastern calamity and a major misfortune for the Turanian people." [5].

The Qing court signed the Treaty of Settlement of the Three Eastern Provinces with the Tsarist Russia in 1902, but by 1903, the Tsarist Russia had still not withdrawn its forces from northeastern China, despite its invasion of the region in 1900. Japan declared war on Russia in 1904 with the strategy of "preserving China." While the Russians lost their privileges in Lushun and Dalian, gave up the southern half of Sakhalin Island to Japan, and the Tsar's government entered a crisis before being destroyed by the revolution in 1917, Japan triumphed at the cost of heavy casualties and emerged as one of the great powers. But Japan asserted its own claim to the privileges that Tsarist Russia had initially occupied following the Russo-Japanese War [6].

From this point of view, modern Japan, while seeking to be on an equal footing with the Western powers, did not treat its Asian neighbors as equals. Japan's behavior before and after the Russo-Japanese War is consistent with Weiner's "two-tiered view of race". In the Otsu Incident, the motive of Tsuda Sanzō was highly consistent with the idea of "resisting foreigners (Jōi)" at the end of the Edo period. After the First Sino-Japanese War, the Western powers considered rising Japan as a new threat, Kaiser Wilhelm II directly ignited climax of the "Yellow Peril." Because Japan was competing with Russia for control of the Korean Peninsula and northeastern China, Tsarist Russia was directly facing the "Yellow Peril". Naturally, Japan was unwilling to give up the fight against Tsarist Russia and was also unwilling to submit to the Western nations as the "white races," referring to them as the "yellow race." The quest for area of influence and the clash of ideologies turned the Russo-Japanese War into an explosive point of contradictions. However, modern Japan likewise adopted the "survival of the fittest" social Darwinist theory and persecuted its Asian neighbors.

4. The Conflict between Japanized Sinocentrism and Racism to “Yellow Race”

As mentioned above, the Russo-Japanese War was certainly caused by the competition between the two sides for the sphere of influence of Northeast China and the Korean Peninsula, and the clash of racial ideologies, typified by the "Yellow Peril," also played a role in contributing to the conflict. However, it should be noted that the sense of superiority was not unilateral among the Western powers towards Japan. During the Age of Exploration, Portuguese and Spanish merchant ships arrived in Japan and were called "southern barbarians." As Portuguese and Spanish missionaries spread their missionary work in Japan, and as Oda Nobunaga, the most powerful man in Japan at that time, adopted a permissive attitude toward Christianity, the number of believers in Japan continued to increase, from the daimyo to the commoners. After Oda Nobunaga's suicide, his power was eventually consolidated and inherited by Toyotomi Hideyoshi. At first, Toyotomi did not reject Christianity, but in 1587, after conquering Kyushu, he issued a decree expelling Christian priests, in which he called Japan the "land of the deities (shinkoku)" and denounced Christianity as "evil doctrine." Although the Tokugawa shogunate allowed the spread of Christianity at the beginning of the Edo period, it eventually banned the spread of Christianity. Thus, it can be seen that, after a series of repetitions, the Japanese "land of the deities" was not compatible with the Western "Kingdom of Heaven" on the religious level. With the exception of a very small number of secretive Christians, Christianity did not return to Japan until the Tokugawa shogunate was forced to "open the country" at the end of the Edo period, which was not far from the Meiji Restoration.

The Meiji Restoration's "Five Articles of Pledge" clearly stated "to seek knowledge in the world." According to the situation at that time, it mainly referred to the pursuit of knowledge in Europe and the United States, and the categorization of human races was also one of them. However, Blumenbach's view that "colored races" were "degraded" from "white races" contradicted Japan's national pride and even its sense of superiority. Japan takes the Emperor, who is "bansei ikkei (a line unbroken for ages eternal)," as the supreme authority, and regards itself as the "land of the deities" and foreign countries as "barbarians." The struggle against aggression since the late Edo period, when

the country was forced to open, was called the "war against the barbarians (Jōi)" Even if it was not possible to defeat the Western powers militarily in the short term, Japan hoped to revise the original unequal treaties, which was called "breaking the treaty to repel the barbarian."

In 1869, following the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate, the newly formed government decreed to compile the history of Japan. "In order to foster the moralities on the land under heaven, it is necessary to quickly correct the morality of the status between monarch and subject, and to make clear the distinction between the home and foreigner, the civilized and the barbarian," states the decree [7]. However, it is noteworthy that prior to the Russo-Japanese War, Japan had not emerged victorious over any Western nations and continued to be subjugated by them, thereby falling behind. Therefore, at the time, it seemed indisputable that the "white race" was superior to the "yellow race." And so, the Japanese people, "descendants of the deities," were less "civilized" than the "white race," who were "barbarians." Thus, the "white race" as "barbarians" was more "civilized" than the Japanese people, "descendants of the deities" but categorized as "yellow race" by the West. These two conflicting conceptions has long influenced Japan's internal and external perceptions.

Tokugawa Mitsukuni, grandson of Ieyasu, the second ruler of Mito realm, accepted Zhu Shunshui as his instructor and began compiling *Dai Nihonshi* (the History of Great Japan), a work of historical fiction that imitated the official records of the Chinese dynasties, as ZHU Lili related. On one hand, it contains biographies of Japanese emperors categorized as "honki," which are equivalent to those of Chinese emperors categorized as "benji." On the other hand, Chinese dynasties Sui, Tang, Song, Yuan, and Ming were included in it as "inferior neighbors (shoban)," which was an inverse imitation of Sinocentrism. Japan was thus positioned as the focal point of the Japanized Sinocentrist order [8]. Mito historiography was an important part of the Mito school from the early Edo period to the late Edo period, and then absorbed by the Meiji government. "(To) make clear the distinction between the home and foreigner, the civilized and the barbarian" written by Emperor Meiji was the embodiment and continuation of the spirit of Mito historiography.

The French nobleman Count Gobineau published his *The Inequality of Human Races* in 1855, two years after Japan was forced to declare independence. In it, he contended that while the "Yellow Race" and the "Black Race" were not directly descended from Adam, the "White Race" had earliest ancestors and that racial differences were irreversible". Consequently, the "white race's" "superiority" was both "scientific" and "God's will." This was unacceptable to modern Japan because of the irreconcilable contradiction between the "will of Amaterasu" and the "will of God." This contradiction might have been eased or even set aside, but it would not disappear until the emperor ceased to be a "living god (arahitogami)" and the idea of racial equality became deeply rooted in people's mind. As Sven Saaler points out, with the evolution of "ethnology" in Japan, there was a tendency to mix ethnology with the concept of "the civilized versus the barbarian" in the ideology of Sinocentrism. However, this hybridization did not conflict with the contradiction between the two conceptions: "Japan the civilized versus West the barbarian" in Japanized Sinocentrism and "superior white versus inferior yellow" from the West. The contradiction did not disappear, but had been expressed in different forms in different discourses on "human race" in modern Japan [9-10].

5. The Contradiction between Pursuing Racial Equality and Seeking Racial Superiority

It is true that Japan was progressive when it proposed the "Case for the Elimination of Ethnic Discrimination" at the Paris Peace meeting, the first of its kind at a major international meeting. The Emperor, a descendant of Amaterasu, was seen as the "living god" who ruled over the Japanese people, who were considered to be "descendants of the deities," and this belief was unquestionably one of the pillars upon which the nation and modern Japan were built. This meant that Japan, the "land of the deities," was naturally "optimal," not equal to other nations or races. On the other hand, in contradiction to this setting, Japan had long been discriminated against and suppressed by the more

powerful powers belonging to the "white race," and therefore Japan was concerned with pursuing equality with the other powers.

Mori Ōgai in his article "Ōkaron Kōgai (The Gist of Yellow Peril)" criticized the term "Yellow Peril," and condemned the Tsarist Russia for creating a massacre on the Heilongjiang riverside, nibbling at Lushun and Dalian, forcing the Qing court to lease Liaoyang, which could be described as "disobedience to humanity, destruction of international law and horrifying." [3, 11]. However, as an army medical doctor who had gone to the First Sino-Japanese War, he did not condemn the Lushun Massacre as well [3, 11]. With regard to "Yellow Peril," Mori Ōgai also argued that "[Japan's] victory was Yellow Peril, or its defeat a barbarism." [3, 12]. Mori did point out the double standard of the "Yellow Peril," but Mori did not completely reject the Western "theory of the superiority of races," but rather made an adjustment: it was not that the whole of humanity as a whole needed to be enlarged. He argued, while the "superior races" ("white races" and "yellow races") should be allowed to multiply, the reproduction of the "weaker races" should be reduced [3, 13]. In this way, Mori categorized the "yellow race" and the "white race" as the "superior races," and the "weaker ones" as the "inferior races," to be "reduced in reproduction."

Japan's geography textbooks also provide a glimpse of the complexity of Japan's responses to the "ethnography" from the West. In the above research note by Takezawa, she selected and analyzed the Japanese geography textbooks from the early to the late Meiji period, in which Shinsen Chiri Shōshi mentioned that the line of Japanese emperors was "unbroken for ages eternal (bansei ikkei);" Chūtō Kyōiku Bankoku Chishi argued that, among the five "races," the two of them, European and Asian, were intellectually advanced, while the other three were mostly ignorant and barbaric peoples; Shōgaku Bankoku Chishi considered the Japanese and the Chinese to be the most advanced of the "yellow races," while the "white races" formed the most powerful nations in the world because of their superior intellect; according to Chūgaku Honpō Chiri Kyōkasho, Japanese people generally belonged to "yellow race" and were divided into five major "races" according to their languages, customs, nature, and appearance, namely, Yamato, Ryukyu, Ainu, Han, and Taiwan. In this textbook, the Yamato were described as courageous in nature and gentle in appearance, with noble thoughts and good technical crafts, moreover, rich in the spirit of loyalty and patriotism; savages in Taiwan as fierce and violent, the Ainu with nature of the courageous, but blunt and uncultured, really a poor "race" [2]. In the quoted texts in the textbooks, there were those which recognized the "white race" as the most "superior," those which tried to put the "yellow race" and the "white race" together; those which discriminated against non-Yamato ethnic groups that were subjected to the rule of the Japanese Empire, and those which praised the Yamato ethnic group, all of which reflected the complexity of the perception of the "yellow race."

In the modern Western perception, no matter whether Japan claimed to be "white" or "yellow," Japanese people were "yellow" and were not treated as equals. Based on the "distinction between the civilized and the barbarian," Japan would not be willing to be discriminated and suppressed, but tried its best to seek equality with other powers, and even envisioned to surpass the Western powers and dominate the world. On the other hand, in modern times, Japan discriminated against, exploited and oppressed Ryukyu, Korea and China, and during the Second World War, it not only invaded China, but also extended its aggression to Southeast Asia and Oceania in the name of "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity," which was very different from the concept of racial equality.

6. Conclusion

Starting from the relatively well-known "Yellow Peril" and the Russo-Japanese War, this article explores the complexity of modern Japan's response to the Western concept of the "yellow race," mainly during the Meiji period. In general, the Russo-Japanese War was a sort of "self-realization" of "Yellow Peril," but Japan continued to exploit and oppress China and Korea after the war; the Japanese concept of "the civilized versus the barbarian" was incompatible with the Western concept of "superiority and inferiority of races." Out of the concept of "civilized Japan versus Western

barbarians," Japan pursued equality with the Western powers, and at the same time, influenced by the social Darwinism behind the Western racial theories, Japan also sought superiority over other peoples and races.

This essay explores Japan's understanding of the term "yellow race" throughout the Meiji era, as well as in relation to the "Yellow Peril" and the Russo-Japanese War. In a somewhat beneficial way for the connected study that follows, the author draws attention to the contradiction that exists between the West's "white superiority and yellow inferiority" and Japan's "civilized Japan versus Western barbarians." However, there are still a lot of issues with this paper. For example, the author has not yet examined the various perspectives on the idea of "yellow race" and how it has developed and collided in Japan since the present day. This is an area that will require further work. In the future, it would be better to focus on the views of critics such as Fukuzawa Yūkichi and Takayama Chogyū, and politicians such as Yamagata Aritomo and Konoe Atsumaro.

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