

**“ILLUSIONS OF THE WHITE RACE” (1921)
By Ōkuma Shigenobu**

Introduction

Ōkuma Shigenobu (1838-1922) was one of the leaders of the Meiji Restoration and a leading statesman in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan. Ōkuma served as Japan's Minister of Finance, Foreign Minister, and (on two occasions, in 1898 and 1914-16) as Prime Minister. He also was the founder of Waseda University, a prestigious private institution in Tokyo.

In this piece, written not long before his death, Ōkuma captures long-standing Japanese resentments of racially motivated discrimination at the hands of the Western powers. The recent Versailles Peace Conference (1919) is certainly fresh in Ōkuma's mind, as the Japanese delegates there had proposed a racial equality clause in the Covenant of the League of Nations, only to be rebuffed by Australian, American, and European resistance. In the 1920s, anger over American racism would flare once again, especially in the wake of the Immigration Act of 1924 (often called the Asian exclusion act), which sought to block Japanese migration to the United States.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

From *What Japan Thinks*, edited by K. K. Kawakami (New York: Macmillan, 1921).

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The Renaissance during the Middle Ages stimulated the progress of the material civilization in Europe and helped the Europeans to grow richer and stronger than the Asiatic races who kept on slumbering in their old civilization. Being seized by an insatiable, aggressive desire, the Europeans took full advantage of their lethargy and swooped down on India and other parts of Asia. They either conquered the Asiatic people by force, or dominated them by dint of superior economic organization, or cheated them out of their territories. The ascendancy of the white races is due to the fact that they came into the possession of material civilization a little earlier than their non-white brothers.

The white are obsessed with the mistaken theory that they are superior to all other races. This is the most serious obstacle in the way of the realization of racial equality.

Now the Japanese, the Chinese, the Mongolian, the Turks, the Indians, the Afghans, the Persians, the Arabs, the Malayans, the American aborigines, and the African peoples are all non-white. They are all held in contempt by the whites. And it is the common belief among the whites that the darker the skin, the more inferior is the race. It is based neither upon science, nor upon any positive experience. It is mere superstition backed by historical prejudices.

The whites are of the conviction that they are too superior a people to be governed by their non-white fellows. Therefore, they demand the privilege of extraterritoriality in the countries of the Asiatic races. They establish their own courts and trample under foot the laws and courts of Asiatic countries ...

Of all the non-white countries, Japan had taken the lead in adopting the best parts of European civilization — including its military side. She codified her laws, and reformed her police and judicial systems, her military and naval forces, thus placing herself almost on an equal footing with that of the European countries. Therefore, the Europeans were compelled to withdraw their extraterritorial rights from Japan ...

Some whites regard the development of Japan as an unjustifiable encroachment upon their own rights. They either instigate a non-white race against Japan or plan to organize a league of the white nations to perpetuate a white supremacy in the world. Be it remembered, however, that no unjust and unreasonable agitation against this country will ever succeed, as God never sides with an unjust cause.

It is, of course, true that there are still peoples in this world who are so backward in civilization that they cannot at once be admitted into the international family on an equal footing. But it will never do to give discriminatory treatment to them. What is needed by them is proper guidance and direction. And when they have reached a certain stage of civilization, they should be given an equal place and rank in the comity of the nations. Although most Asiatic nations are fully peers of European nations, yet they are discriminated against because of the color of the skin. The root of it lies in the perverted feeling of racial superiority entertained by the whites. If things are allowed to proceed in the present way, there is every likelihood that the peace of the world will be endangered. It, therefore, behooves all well-wishers of mankind to exert their utmost to remove this gross injustice immediately.

Questions:

1. What are Ōkuma's main arguments here? What kind of evidence does he use to support his points? Do you agree with him?
2. Does Ōkuma himself see all races and nationalities as equal? Where does he believe Japan stands in the world? What yardstick does he use for measuring Japan's status?
3. How do you think you would have responded to this piece as an American political leader at the time?
4. Does it change your opinion of Ōkuma and this document to know that Ōkuma himself was a nobleman, holding the elevated title of marquis, one of the highest ranks in the Japanese peerage?

Longer Selection

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Confucius, the ancient sage of China, taught that all peoples of the earth were brethren; Shakya Muni, the founder of Buddhism, preached that all human beings were equal, while Christ emphasized the necessity of philanthropy. They were the founders of the three leading religions. They came into the world at different times and in different places; yet their teachings unquestionably centered upon the truth and the necessity of human equality. God makes no discrimination against any race or any man. Men are created equal and have equal rights.

With the steadily increasing propagation of mankind the struggle for existence has been growing keener and keener, tending toward the dominance of the stronger over the weaker, who is groaning pitiably under inhuman oppression. The strong having step by step come to occupy an advantageous position in society, the class system has gradually been established; and it is through such processes that nobles, commons, and slaves have come to exist. ...

We may read with pride the pages of our Japanese history, in which slaves do not figure. There are circumstances which make us doubt whether our ancestors, in their conquest of the Korean Peninsula, did not bring the vanquished warriors of the Ye and Myaku tribes to Japan and force them into the occupations which were held in contempt by the natives, such as footgear makers, butchers, and janitors, but the authenticity of this fact remains to be proved. The history of Europe is black with its barbarous record of reducing the vanquished warriors to slaves. ...

Even modern Europe did not develop a conscience strong enough to bring about the abolition of this baneful system; and not until the slave system became a fitting tool to force a civil war in America, did we see its end even there....

The negroes in America, now numbering more than 11 millions, are not yet emancipated in the true sense of the word. The American law prohibits all invidious discrimination against the negroes; yet they are subjected to constant persecutions by the Americans whose prejudices against them are too deep-rooted to be removed by the mere promulgation of laws. Worst of all, the negroes in America are frequently lynched, a vindictive method the parallel of which cannot be found in the history of even the barbarians of the world....

The example set by Japan has convinced the other Asiatic races of the possibility on their part to be on equal footing with the white races, if only they reform their political system and adopt the needed portion of European civilization. In other words, the rise of Japan and the consequent abolition of extraterritoriality have exploded the superstition that the world is to be ruled by the whites.

In this connection, the whites at first believed that Japan's civilization was a mere imitation or a mere veneer, and that it was only fine in appearance, but entirely hollow in reality

**Primary Source Document with Questions (DBQs) on
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and void of sustaining qualities. The result of the Sino-Japanese War, however, was a great surprise to the Europeans. Again the Europeans were taken aback by the outcome of the Russo-Japanese War, in which Russia, one of the strongest white nations, with a most powerful army, was beaten by a non-white nation of the Far East. ...

But what happened after the Russo-Japanese War came as a miserable disappointment to the whites. Since the war with Russia, Japan's industry witnessed a phenomenal development. Hitherto, she was entirely dependent upon other countries for the supply of machinery and industrial products, but after the war she began to export her industrial products and machines to the outside world, thus changing her status from that of an importer to that of an exporter....

Just as Japan's successes in warfare testified to her military strength, development of her industry, shipping, and commerce accounts for the growing national wealth. In consequence, the white peoples have been obliged to give up their mistaken idea about Japan....

Thus Japan has demonstrated the possibility on the part of non-white races to take rank with the white peoples if only they exert themselves.