

PART II

Race and Language Reform

I WISH TO HERE BRIEFLY PROVIDE A HISTORICAL NARRATIVE OF RACE, how it began to denote what it is in the modern world order. As I stated in the introduction, we must be mindful of the fact that race is fabricated. In order to give its imagined existence the appearance of the real, the concept of race needs to be constantly produced and reproduced, along with other indexes of identity, such as national community and national language. While I discuss the uses of racial categories in history, we must constantly examine race via the ideological world order that reproduces and reifies these categories as such.

As many historians of race have remarked, it was only in the eighteenth century that race appeared as a concept to categorize human beings through physical characteristics, primarily skin color.¹ Prior to this, social status by birth and religion provided a far more prevalent form of self-identity. Through their encounters with Africa, Europeans had of course recognized that they had lighter pigmentations, but race did not become the dominant taxonomy of classification. In effect, the idea of “whiteness” as indicative of a pan-European “superior” race was slow to develop before the eighteenth century.

The advent of “enlightenment” and modern science marked the beginning of change. As a means to turn away from religion, race became one of the defining indexes organizing humans as part of the animal kingdom rather than as “children of God.” The well-known father of physical anthropology, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840), published *On the Natural Varieties of Mankind* in 1776. There he introduced the authoritative classification of races, which he divided into five: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American, and Malay. He was the first to trace the white race to the Caucasus. “Mongolians” referred to those in

Asia, including China and Japan; “Ethiopians” to the “dark-skinned” inhabitants of Africa; “Americans” to the natives of the New World; and the “Malays” were the Polynesians and the aborigines of Australia. Such classifications were imported to Meiji Japan through the geography of *Yochi shiryaku* (*An Abridged Account of the World*, 1870), compiled by Uchida Masao and used as a school textbook.

Once such a classification took form, the hierarchizing of the categories soon followed. In the 1798 work *Outline of the History of Humanity*, the German philosopher Christoph Meiners aestheticized “whiteness” as “beautiful,” which he further linked with “intelligence.” In the same vein, “darker” people were designated as “ugly” and “semi-civilized.”² Such categorizations set the stage for the full-blown biologism and racism fueled by nineteenth-century Social Darwinism.

This racial taxonomy was inextricably connected with the emergence of Europe as the “civilized” center through which the world was defined. In the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, Europe had emerged as a self-conscious unit.³ Despite many internal differences, it began to identify itself as a “continent,” despite the lack of any geographical basis for this determination. There can be seen a gradual shift in the world order as Europeans identify themselves as “the West” vis-à-vis non-Europeans (the Rest, as Stuart Hall famously described them).⁴ The privileged site of “whiteness,” although in appearance tied to “Europeans,” was thus tightly linked with colonial expansion and the ideological world order that it produced. In this regime, the whiteness of “the West” became the standard regulating this world order, while the Rest were viewed as the deviation from the standard. It is important to keep in mind that this notion of the “West” is not at all monolithic. For example, Britain colonized Ireland and the Irish were not considered “white” in the United States until the late nineteenth century. Similarly, Jews and Italians were not considered white. It is not difficult to see that the category of the West is highly unstable.⁵ Precisely because of this, however, many forces have come to reproduce and reify this structure of the West and the Rest.

The West and the Rest are always already in a cofigurative relation, to borrow Naoki Sakai’s term.⁶ Cofiguration is a mechanism of semantic correlation by which a collective represents itself vis-à-vis the other. It is a relationship of equivalence, but this equivalence can never sustain itself, as there would inevitably be a difference that is identified as “excess” or “lack.” The West is the regulative idea by which the Rest is evaluated. In effect, the excess or lack will invariably be attributed to the Rest. It is, furthermore, a structure of desire. The West will always present itself as the goal to which the Rest aspires, but remains ultimately inaccessible, which is a necessary condition for its status as object of desire.

When Japan joined the international community in the late nineteenth century, the world was already racialized. The Tokugawa Shogunate closely followed the fate of Qing China, which had survived two Opium Wars in the mid-nineteenth century and became semi-colonized as a result. Japan thus had to desperately avoid becoming China, and this meant becoming a “first-rate nation” in a world

that designated Asia as “semi-civilized.” In other words, joining the world order but avoiding the trap of colonialism meant internalizing “the West” as the object of desire and invariably approximating it.

The racial taxonomy produced in eighteenth-century Europe was transmitted to Japan even before the Meiji Restoration (1868).⁷ However, the most influential works on racial taxonomy appeared after the Restoration, especially through the writings of Fukuzawa Yukichi. In *Shōchū bankoku ichiran* (*All Countries at a Glance: Pocket Edition*, 1869), he defines the five races in the following manner:

1. White race: They have the fairest skin. . . . They are the most intelligent and capable of attaining the highest level of civilization.
2. Yellow race: Their skin is yellow like oil. . . . They are capable of endurance and diligence but are limited in intelligence and slow in making progress.
3. Red Race: Their skin mixes red and brown and is like copper. . . . They are aggressive and combative in nature, and always vengeful.
4. Black Race: Their skin is black and their hair curly like sheep. . . . They are indolent in habit and have not attained progress.
5. Brown Race: Their skin is brown like rust. . . . They are fierce and strongly vengeful.⁸

Here one can clearly see the racial hierarchy organized by the framework of Social Darwinism. This racial hierarchy was inextricably tied to geography: the “white race” is in Europe, the “yellow race” in Asia, the “black race” in Africa, etc. Fukuzawa himself fully endorsed this view. Such classification also shapes his *Sekai kuni-zukushi* (*The Countries of the World*, 1869), which was used as a school geography textbook.⁹ In effect, the study of geography marked the very internalization of such racial hierarchy. In his *Bunmeiron no gairyaku* (*An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*, 1875), Fukuzawa organizes the stages of civilization into three categories: “uncivilized” (*mikai*), “half-civilized” (*hankai*), and “civilized” (*bunmei*). Given the world order encountered by Meiji Japan, Fukuzawa had no choice but to situate Japan among the half-civilized.

The race war in Meiji Japan was very much a pursuit of “whiteness” in this racial order. Predictably, as the Japanese were designated as “yellow,” an affinity was established with those in China and Korea. In the 1880s, Kōakai (The Society of Asianism), a group that promoted the goal of Asian consolidation, was founded. This group fostered integration and a collective sense of solidarity among Asians in an attempt to ward off the threat of Western imperialism. Even within this organization, however, Japan sought to claim the position of leader. The power struggle in East Asia, in other words, reflected Japanese desire to assume the status of the West. As a result, Japan soon strove to become a colonial power itself. As early as 1876, Japan subjected Korea to unequal treaties that imposed harsher conditions than those forced upon Japan by the United States. After its victory in the first Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), Japan invaded Taiwan and then later annexed Korea in 1910.

Force was not the only means Japan used to emulate the West. In fact, Japan presented itself as the object of desire for East Asian countries. It became the East Asian center for gaining “Western knowledge,” resulting in a large influx of students from China and Korea. Japan quickly defined itself as the educator of East Asia. As I will show, it was precisely in this context that Ueda Kazutoshi, the founder of *kokugo*, attempted to define Japanese as the common language of Asia. In this way, Japanese could gain recognition as one of the few “imperial” languages, such as English. Learning Japanese, therefore, was seen as a means to acquire access to modern—and so Western—forms of knowledge.