

DuBois's Perspectives on Asia and Japanese Colonialism

NAKAMURA, Masako Sasamoto

Obirin University, *Obirin Review of International Studies*, No. 17, 2005

桜美林大学『国際学レビュー』第17号（2005年）

In *Dusk of Dawn*, his second autobiography written in 1940, DuBois views his 72 years of life as the “years of cosmic significance.” Those years contained “the turmoil of Asia in China, India and Japan, and the world-wide domination of white Europe.”¹⁾ Seeing the problem of the twentieth century as that of the “color-line,” as stated prophetically in 1903 in *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois kept his keen eyes on international development as the relation of white domination of the darker peoples of Africa and Asia. As indicated above, he had been watching Asia, especially China, India and Japan carefully. Japan had attracted his special attention as the colored nation challenging the white imperialist hegemony. To DuBois, Japan was the country which provided exception to white domination.

Pointing out that the world scheme of white domination is not quite complete, DuBois states:

First of all, yellow Japan has apparently escaped the cordon of this color bar. This is disconcerting and dangerous to white hegemony.²⁾

On the other hand, China is depicted as the target of imperialistic lust. Characterizing the “present hegemony of the white races” “outrageous programs of wholesale human degeneration,”³⁾ he states:

This movement gathered force and strength during the latter half of the nineteenth century, reached its culmination when France, Germany, England and Russia began the partition of China and the East.⁴⁾

And here Japan intervenes. He continues, “with the sudden self-assertion of Japan, its wildest dreams collapsed.”⁵⁾ As expressed here, DuBois viewed Japan as defender of Asia against Europe.

Scholars discussing DuBois and Japan have pointed out that DuBois kept a favorable view of Japan.⁶⁾ In his extensive work on African Americans’ views on Japan and Japanese, Reginald Kearney has

a section on DuBois's pro-Japanese views and suggests that "DuBois's remarks regarding Japan's position in East Asia were invariably favorable to Japan."⁷⁾

Manning Marable writes in his biography of DuBois that he "had been an admirer of the Japanese for many years, and he tended to interpret the imperialist state's political actions in the best possible light."⁸⁾ He also points out that DuBois "depicted Japanese imperialism in benign terms, almost to the point of apologetics"⁹⁾

Why was it that DuBois was so favorable to Japan? Is it the manifestation of his "racism" as some scholars put it? I don't think it's appropriate to understand it as his "racism" because it did not have the actual force to oppress any group of people. I would say, rather, that what influenced his perception of Japan and its imperialism is his "racial" thinking? Qhis perception of the international development through the prism of color line. Of course, this by itself does not provide an answer to the question, and I would not aspire to give the answer to it. Rather, what I would like to do is to explore his views on Japan briefly here, and try to relate it to his perception of the world through the "color line."

To begin with, let us see his reflection on his approach to "the era of empire" while he was teaching at colleges from 1894 to 1910. In his autobiography, he writes:

I did not have any clear conception or grasp of the meaning of that colonial imperialism which was beginning to grip the world. My only approach to meanings and helpful study there again was through my interest in race contact.....That interest began to clear my vision and interpret the whirl of events which swept the world on. Japan was rising to national status and through the Chinese War and the Russian War, despite rivalry with Germany, Russia, and Great Britain, she achieved a new and nearly equal status in the world, which only the United States refused to recognize.¹⁰⁾

As is stated here, interpreting the international events through his interest in race contact, rising Japan attracted his special attention.

The United States was, to DuBois, the country which increased the race contact through slave trade and opening the doors of China and Japan. DuBois states:

Today we have in the world growing race contact.....No one has done more for increasing this contact of the nations than we here in America. We not only brought Negroes here..., but we have pounded masterfully, almost impudently, at the gates of China and Japan.¹¹⁾

In several occasions in his writings, DuBois relates some points of his life to Japan. As one of the “stirring and change which were to mean much in my life,” he writes, “In Japan the Meiji Emperor rose to power the year I was born.”¹²⁾ The year of his birth, 1868, is thus related to the birth of the imperial state in Japan. And “the year before I entered college,...Japan attempted a constitution with elective representatives.”¹³⁾ The Constitution of Imperial Japan was promulgated actually in 1889, the year he was at Harvard. He then studied at the University of Berlin, and “The war between China and Japan broke out the year of my return,”¹⁴⁾ which was 1894.

Three years later, on 5 March 1897, DuBois presented a paper, “The Conservation of Races,” at the first meeting of the American Negro Academy. According to Marable, it “not only established his position as the leading young black scholar, but also determined much of his future cultural and social orientation.”¹⁵⁾ Noteworthy is that he refers to Japan as the example of people bound together striving for the ideal.

In his presentation, he called for the serious consideration of the meaning of race and race development. Viewing history as the striving of race groups to develop for civilization its particular message and its particular ideal, he observed that “the Negro race has not as yet given to civilization the full spiritual message which they are capable of

giving.”¹⁶⁾ Then, he argues that this message, as well as those of other groups which have not given their full messages, should be delivered “by the development of these groups, not as individuals, but as races.”¹⁷⁾ His reference to Japan appears here as follows:

For the Development of Japanese genius, Japanese literature and art, Japanese spirit, only Japanese, bound and welded together, Japanese inspired by one vast ideal, can work out in its fullness the wonderful message which Japan has for the nations of the earth. For the development of Negro genius, of Negro literature and art, of Negro spirit, only Negroes bound and welded together, Negroes inspired by one vast ideal, can work out in its fullness the great message we have for humanity.¹⁸⁾

This reference to Japan preceding the call to Negro people, DuBois must have perceived Japan as a convincing example of his argument for race unity. Perhaps DuBois did not perceive at that time the ethnic plurality and caste-like distinction among people of Japan.

Whatever actually Japan’s ideal was, DuBois took it as the challenge to white hegemony, and he hoped that Japan would lead the struggle to overthrow it with other colored people. Just as DuBois regarded American Negroes as avant-garde of Pan-Negroism, he probably regarded Japan as avant-garde of all colored people, and especially of Asians. This view is also consonant to his idea of the Talented Tenth, able and dedicated segments of people leading the fight for their liberation.

This point is more clearly expressed in “The African Roots of War” written in 1915. Arguing that racial prejudice, imperialism, economic subjugation, and religious hypocrisy must end, he stated:

In this great work who can help us? In the Orient, the awakened Japanese and the awakening leaders of New China; in India and Egypt the young men trained in Europe and

European ideals ... And ... the ten million black folk of the United States, now a problem, then a world-salvation.¹⁹⁾

Although he kept watching Japan and its development, note that his reference to Japan in "The Conservation of Races" is prior to Japanese victory over Russia in 1905, which Kearney points out as setting the tenor of DuBois's remarks on Japan.²⁰⁾ He hailed it as Japan making "Europe surrender to Asia."

Japan had, for sure, as one of its aims of nation building not to be colonized by European powers. The sentiment and rhetoric of anti-colonialism was so prevalent that Japanese government did not officially call the areas of its possessions, Taiwan and Korea, colonies. Instead, those areas were called "gaichi" (exterior land) as compared to "naichi" (interior land) which was Japan prior to its expansion.²¹⁾ Japanese expansion was justified as expanding Japan's regime, and even the benevolence, to the exterior lands and not the conquest or the oppression.

Whatever the rhetoric, people of "gaichi" did not have votes to send their delegates to Tokyo, their education system was not equal to that of "naichi," and people there were discriminated against those from "naichi."

Also, Japan justified its expansion as defense and counter-attack to European imperialism, and DuBois seems to agree with it. He wrote in 1913 that Japan and China are arming desperately against 'colonial' aggression and 'imperial' expansion of Europe.²²⁾ He even encouraged and called for war against Europe stating that "there is but one thing for the trained man of darker blood to do and that is definitely and as openly as possible to organize his world for war against Europe."²³⁾ Japan was doing this "by open increase of armaments," while India, "by secret, underground propaganda," and China, "by desperate efforts at modernization," were pursuing it.²⁴⁾

And of World War I, he argued that it was "a war of rivalry between imperial powers with the exploitation of Asia and Africa as the prize to be won? Japan felt that European imperialism was monopolizing the

exploitation of Asia in which she was by situation and race the natural leader.”²⁵⁾

DuBois also seems to have been tolerant of Japanese aggression in China. He contrasted “helpless nation like China” and “Japanese guns,”²⁶⁾ or, China’s submission to white aggression and Japanese resistance. He was more critical to China and understood Japanese aggression in light of contesting that of Europe, defending Asia against it. The bitterness toward Japanese held by Chinese people was a sore to him, and he even dared to ask them directly when he visited Shanghai in 1936, “Why is it that you hate Japan more than Europe when you have suffered more from England, France, than from Japan?”²⁷⁾

He was also tolerant to Japanese control of Manchuria, its puppet state, and even praised it after he visited there in 1936. What Japan had accomplished in four years, DuBois stated, “is nothing less than marvelous.” He found colonialism there to be different from that of Europe’s. He reported that there was an absence of racial or color caste, the people appeared happy, there was no unemployment, there was public peace and order, and a lynching there would be unthinkable. “Clearly this colonial effort of a colored nation is something to watch and know,” he stated. When he left Manchuria, he was convinced that “colonial enterprise by a colored nation need not imply the caste, exploitation and subjection which it has always implied in the case of white Europe.”²⁸⁾

To him, accusation of it by the United States and European nations was hypocrisy. DuBois agreed that if Japan had not taken Manchuria one of the other imperialism powers would have. “England, France and America gorged with the loot of the world, suddenly became highly moral on the subject of annexing other people’s land,” he stated. DuBois, while enumerating others’ colonial possessions, concurred that Japan needed Manchuria more than any of the others needed the territories they held.²⁹⁾

Visiting Shanghai after Manchuria, he arrived in Japan on December 2, 1936, and stayed for 2 weeks, visiting many places and giving lectures. How did this country, which he regarded as the example

of people bound together for their ideal in “The Conservation of Races,” appear in his eyes? Actually his perception of it was in line of this framework. Japan was “above all a country of colored people run by colored people for colored people.” “The Japanese run Japan, and that even English and Americans recognize and act accordingly,” he stated. His visit to Japan was “an experience never to be forgotten.” For the first time in his life, he felt that he stood in a land where white people did not control directly or indirectly. DuBois was also impressed to know that Japanese with whom he spoke classed themselves with Chinese, Indians, and Negroes as people standing against the white world.³⁰⁾

But as to the ideals the Japanese were pursuing, DuBois had reservations and concerns. Particularly he was concerned with its capitalism development, and hoped that Japan would take the lead toward the industrial democracy. In his commencement speech at Fisk University in 1938, he spoke of the hegemony of white civilization as follows:

With few exceptions, we are all today “white folk’s niggers.” No, do not wince. I mean nothing insulting or derogatory, but this is a concrete designation which indicates that very, very many colored folk: Japanese, Chinese, Indians, Negroes; and of course, the vast majority of white folk, have been so enthused, oppressed, and suppressed by current white civilization that they think and judge every thing by its terms.³¹⁾

In this respect Japan did not live up to his expectation of contesting the hegemony of white civilization.

Nevertheless, his support for Japan was not diminished. He blamed the war not on Japan but on “all those white nations which for a hundred years and more had by blood and rapine forced their rule upon colored nation.”³²⁾ Japan’s joining the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy was, to DuBois, a matter of self-defense. As for the war between Japan

and the United States, he blamed the race prejudice on the part of America responsible for it. In a telegraph to Harry F Ward dated October 7, 1937, he wrote that he was “bitterly opposed to present effort of American and English capital to drive this nation into war against Japan. Such miserable war would be based on color prejudice.”³³⁾ And in a letter to Andrew J. Allison, the alumni secretary at Fisk University dated February 3, 1941, DuBois wrote that he was glad his alma mater had not yet yielded to the war hysteria. According to him, “in this war we are trying to attack Japan because of race prejudice and we are defending China not because we love them but because we want to exploit them.”³⁴⁾ And in response to a letter dated February 13, 1939 from Waldo McNutt, asking DuBois to issue a denial to the rumors that he was receiving funds from the Japanese government for propaganda work, he not only denied the rumors but also issued a very passionate remark of his support of Japan; “I believe in Japan. I believe in Asia for the Asiatics and despite hell of war and the fascism of capital, I see in Japan the best agent for this end.”³⁵⁾

This strong statement, in a sense, befuddles me. It is clear that Japan is not living up to his expectation, and I am not sure if it is even heading in this direction. I have to admit that DuBois’s pro-Japanese statements have been a puzzle to me. Why was he so tolerant of Japanese aggression in Asia? Why could he not criticize it more? But, I realize that it’s inappropriate for me to wish that DuBois would have criticized Japan more radically, for, it is our duty to analyze and criticize what our country has done in the past. Our problem, first of all, is that we have not done enough self-criticism of Japan as an imperialist aggressor. With the rather sudden end of World War II with the unprecedented destruction by atomic bombs, Japanese have long perceived themselves as victims of the war. The United States also helped in this line of thinking with its occupation policy.

Japanese spoke of Asia for Asiatics, and expressed, at times, solidarity with other people of color. But it was only when perceived against the white imperial powers. Anti-imperialist outlook in this sense was utilized to justify Japanese imperialism. Ideals of Asian

liberation and equality of Asian people, expressed by some Japanese, were compromised by the idea of Japanese as superior people leading other Asians. It can be understood as a contradiction between imperialism and nationalism. DuBois says he saw no discrimination by race or color in Manchuria. But within the “same” race or color, there was a caste-like ethnic distinction as Japanese “naich” people were considered special and superior due to the lineage to the Japanese emperor. The idea of “blood stock” was employed to distinguish people of the same race, Taiwan, Korea and Manchuria, from Japanese. The nature of its rule also differed within “gaichi.” That in Manchuria, which DuBois observed, was less harsh than in Korea and Taiwan.

My uncle, my mother’s elder brother, was in Manchuria from 1935 to 1936. He was employed in a small business. It is fascinating to imagine that my uncle and DuBois might have passed each other on the streets there. I was born after World War II, after Japanese colonial possession was terminated. I probably do not have direct responsibility for Japanese colonialism. But if we still have social institutions, social structure and social values produced in those days lingering on, and if we receive any benefit from it, it is still our duty to critically examine it in order to reconstruct it. In such an endeavor, we can learn from the hopes that DuBois had for us. I would hope Japan to be judged favorably by DuBois, not within the framework of color line, but by the extent of real solidarity we might be building in Japan and in the world. In this endeavor, I would like to take his words, “I believe in Japan,” as the faith he had for our future.

Notes

- 1) W. E. B. DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940; rpt. Milwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson, 1975), p. 1.
- 2) “The African Roots of War (1915),” in Philip S. Foner (ed.), *W. E. B. DuBois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses 1890-1919* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), p. 249.
- 3) “The Evolution of the Race Problem (1909),” in Foner (ed.), *Speeches and Addresses 1890-1919*, p. 205.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- 5) *Ibid.*

- 6) Tomoko Takemoto, "W. E. B. DuBois and Japan," *Shien* 54(2): 79-96.
- 7) Reginald Kearney, *Japanese in the 20th Century: African Americans' Views on Japanese 1900-1945* (Tokyo: Gogatsu Shobou, 1995). This book is published in Japanese. The citation here is from his manuscript on the section, "Pro-Japanese Utterances of W. E. B. DuBois," p. 1. I am grateful to Dr. Kearney for sharing his ideas with me.
- 8) Manning Marable, *W. E. B. DuBois: Black Radical Democrat* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1986), p. 156.
- 9) *Ibid.*
- 10) DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn*, pp. 52-53.
- 11) "Is Race Separation Possible? (1908)," in Foner (ed.) *Speeches and Addresses 1890-1919*, p. 184.
- 12) DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn*, p. 9.
- 13) *Ibid.*, p. 29.
- 14) "A Pageant in Seven Decades (1938)," in Foner (ed.), *Speeches and Addresses 1890-1919*, p. 35.
- 15) Marable, *W. E. B. DuBois*, p. 35.
- 16) W. E. B. DuBois, "The Conservation of Races," *American Negro Academy Occasional Papers*, No.2 (Washington D.C.: American Negro Academy, 1897), p. 9.
- 17) *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 18) *Ibid.*
- 19) "The African Roots of War (1915)," p. 256.
- 20) Kearney, "Pro-Japanese Utterances of W. E. B. DuBois," p. 15.
- 21) Takeshi Komagome, *Cultural Integration of Colonial Imperial Japan* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1996), p. 35.
- 22) *Crisis* 6 (May 1913): 26, cited in W. E. B. DuBois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. DuBois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), p. 347.
- 23) W. E. B. DuBois, *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (1921, rpt. Milwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson, 1975), p. 60.
- 24) *Ibid.*
- 25) "The Negro and Imperialism (1944)," in Philip S. Foner (ed.), *W. E. B. DuBois Speaks: Speeches and Addresses 1920-1963* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), p. 158.
- 26) "Is Race Separation possible? (1908)" in Foner (ed.), *Speeches and Addresses 1890-1919*, p. 184.
- 27) *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 27, 1937.
- 28) *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 13, 1937.
- 29) *Ibid.*
- 30) *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 20, 1937.
- 31) "The Revelation of Saint Orgne the Damned (1938)," Foner (ed.), *Speeches and Addresses 1920-1963*, p. 120.
- 32) *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 25, 1937.
- 33) Herbert Aptheker (ed.), *The Correspondence of W. E. B. DuBois*, 3 vols. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973-1978), vol. 2, p. 147.
- 34) *Ibid.*, p. 272.
- 35) *Ibid.*, p. 185.