Rotem Kowner

From White to Yellow: The Japanese in European Racial Thought, 1300–1735. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014. Pp. xxv + 678. Hb, \$125. CAD, Pb, \$39.95 CAD.

In this erudite, complex, and ambitious work, Rotem Kowner examines how Europeans came to see the Japanese nation as “yellow” and inferior, after initially perceiving them as “white” equals. *From White to Yellow: The Japanese in European Racial Thought, 1300–1735* studies Western racial perceptions of the Japanese in the early modern period, culminating with the publication of Carl Linnaeus's taxonomic work, *Systema naturae* (Leiden: Ex Typographia Joannis Wilhelmi de Groot, 1735). A subsequent volume will continue the study to 1905, when Japan's victory over Russia led to intense racial anxiety in the West. Most studies of the development of racism emphasize European interaction with Africans and the role of the Atlantic slave trade. Kowner's work complicates the history of the construction and development of the idea of race by examining the European encounter with the Japanese, whom Europeans initially found different but not culturally or materially inferior. Moreover, Japanese military power made it impossible for Europeans to dominate their relationship with the Japanese. This encounter, Kowner argues, delayed Europeans' development of a sharp racial hierarchy.

Kowner begins with an overview of concepts and discourses of race and ethnicity and the development of proto-racialist thinking identifying four stages in the process. In Stage I, “Initial Encounter,” humans encountering an Other perceive similarities and differences, particularly differences. “Simply put, there is no Other without the recognition of differences, and Otherness is a prerequisite for the evolution of the concept of race” (10). As Claude Levi-Strauss points out in the text, this need to classify satisfies an inherent intellectual demand for order (10).

The second stage, “Regional Knowledge,” accompanies growing familiarity with other regional groups. Racial affinities and ethnic groupings (“Europeans,” “Indians”) emerge, along with terms like race, stock, lineage, and stem. In Stage III, “Prolonged Encounter and Extended Regional Knowledge,” racism begins to emerge as stereotypes and a hierarchical order develop. Physical features come to be associated with behavioral differences and character. Finally, in Stage IV, “Global Knowledge and Integration,” a global hierarchy is devised, as exemplified in Carl Linnaeus's biological taxonomy. Linnaeus placed plants and animals into a rank-based hierarchy of classes, orders, families, genera, and species.

Kowner uses these stages as he examines three phases in the early modern European encounter with Japan: “Speculation” (1300–1543), “Observation”

(1543–1640), and “Reconsideration” (1640–1735). Before the Portuguese arrived on the Japanese coast in 1543, some Europeans had a vague second-hand awareness of the islands, although there had been no direct contact. Marco Polo, who never went there, described the people of “Cipangu” as white and civilized. Europeans already associated whiteness with “civilized behavior, and advanced material culture, and refinement” (40), while darkness represented “lower civility and status, pagan idolatry, barbarism and slavery” (42).

Perhaps the richest part of Kowner’s account examines the phase he calls “Observation,” the period Charles Boxer in his classic study called *The Christian Century in Japan, 1549–1650* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951). Two uniquely European institutional frameworks shaped the encounter. One was religious orders, in particular the Jesuits. The other was trading and shipping companies, principally the Dutch East India Company. Until the final suppression of Catholic missions in 1614, the Jesuits were the primary European source of information on Japan and played a principal role in formulating European understanding of the Japanese people.

Jesuit attitudes toward the Japanese were complex and sometimes contradictory. Francis Xavier, founder of the Jesuit mission, considered the Japanese civilized, intelligent, and warlike (the last he regarded as a virtue). The Jesuit Luís Fróis found that the Japanese “were similar in the level of civilization [...] and in a few aspects they were even superior,” but “they were so different that they actually embodied a profound contrast in the content and expression of their civilization and character” (80). In any case, Fróis also thought of the Japanese as white.

Jesuit missionaries in Japan were shaped by, and helped formulate, an emerging racial discourse. The *Reconquista* led to an Iberian distinction based on purity of blood, not religion, as Spain and Portugal failed to fully integrate the *conversos* from Judaism and Islam. Such a distinction, however, seems to have been less important with non-Europeans. Alessandro Valignano developed an implicit racial hierarchy in which Japanese ranked highest among non-Europeans.

Kowner explores how slavery, intermarriage and sexual relations with local populations, and “spiritual hierarchy” shaped European attitudes toward the peoples with whom they interacted. The last, of course, was especially pertinent to the Jesuits, who were more welcoming of the Japanese than were other religious orders. In 1579, the Society barred the admission of Asians and Eurasians, but made an exception for Japanese (and later Chinese). Among Asians, Valignano wrote, only the Japanese convert “of their own will, act by reason, and have desire for salvation” (166). By 1594, a slight majority of Jesuits in Japan was Japanese. All Japanese in the order, however, were lay brothers.

Opposition to their ordination as priests drew in part from anti-*converso* attitudes and policies—membership in the order was barred to men “of Hebrew and Saracen stock.” But persecution of the mission in Japan made the creation of an indigenous clergy necessary. In 1601, two Japanese Jesuits were ordained as priests. The Jesuits had established a proto-racial discourse, Kowner writes, but one that “lacked a deterministic biological framework and a coherent taxonomic perspective” (200). East Asians were still perceived as white. (The notorious eighteenth-century French impostor George Psalmanazar was able to pass himself off as a “Formosan.”)

Unlike lands in Asia, Africa, and the Americas conquered and ruled by Europeans, Japan was powerful enough to set the terms of European presence. The expulsion of the Spanish and Portuguese left the Dutch East India Company station in Nagasaki as the only European presence in Japan during Kowner’s third phase: “Reconsideration.” He argues persuasively that the company played a major role in creating an early modern European racial discourse and in placing the Japanese within it. Botany and medicine contributed to this enterprise. The German physician Engelbert Kaempfer, stationed in Nagasaki, for example, applied his training in natural history to describing and classifying humans in biological terms. Yellow skin color became a racial marker. In 1735, Linnaeus classified Asians as *Homo Asiaticus fuscus* (“dark-colored Asian humans”).

A short review cannot do justice to Kowner’s rich, multilayered work. The concluding chapter offers a prologue for the forthcoming second volume, which will examine how the Japanese were relegated to inferiority in the eighteenth century, and how a virulently racial discourse ensued.

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