CHAPTER FIVE

“A VERY GREAT GULF”:
LATE VICTORIAN BRITISH DIPLOMACY AND RACE IN EAST ASIA

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The Japanese are much more diverse than they and the world at large like to think. But history, geography, ethnography and culture have induced certain general characteristics in their society. [...] The contacts of the last one hundred and thirty years have gone deep and have changed Japan beyond recognition, but have left the Japanese...less internationally-minded than the people of most advanced countries.


Writing in the aftermath of one of the international crises that shook East Asia around 1900, the British political commentator and one-time parliamentarian Henry Norman predicted that “[t]he collapse of China...lays the Far East as open to the gambits of international rivalry as a chessboard when the four files face one another for the game.” What he left unsaid was that many of the pieces on the East Asian chessboard were arranged in a hierarchical order that reflected Western perceptions and the power political realities of the day. East Asia was gradually opened to international commerce, diplomacy and exploration from the 1850s onwards. In its wake, Western scientific and cultural discourse, with its

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1 As reproduced in Parris and Bryson, 2010: 83–84.
2 Norman, 1895: 401–402.
unshakeable belief in categorization and classification, sought to place the various ethnic groups in the region within its own established racial views. Such concepts were deeply rooted in contemporary thinking. The quest for a general taxonomy of the known world was firmly embedded in nineteenth-century knowledge-based and -driven societies.3

Historians ought to beware, however, of the dangers of projecting backwards into the nineteenth century the evil and spurious mid-twentieth-century doctrines that were erected on the concept of “race.” Such backwards projection can only lead to a profound misunderstanding of Victorian cultural attitudes towards “race.” For them, the study of human differences was a part of natural history or the archeology of pre-historic man. Undoubtedly, they used the term loosely and in an impressionistic manner. There was also a blithe naivety in their assumption that the precise delineation of external physical or physiognomical characteristics allowed for generalizations about mental traits supposedly associated with them. In this manner, John Beddoe, West country general practitioner-cum-gentleman-scholar, traced the racially diverse population of the British Isles and classified it by its physical appearance.4 In a similar vein, contemporary proto-anthropologists sought to place the ethnicities of Asia in a racially defined order.

For the British, “Empire reinforced a hierarchical view of the world.”5 This not only affected views of those subjected to direct or indirect colonial rule; it also shaped the perceptions of peripheral ethnic groups overseas. Towards the end of the long nineteenth century, these notions of racial hierarchy and stereotyping had become more fully developed and firmly entrenched. In East Asia, the changing perceptions of the Japanese during the second half of the nineteenth century have been charted by a variety of scholars, more so, perhaps, than the equally developed Chinese and Japanese “racial” views.6

This chapter seeks to broaden the debate on late nineteenth-century perceptions of “race” in East Asia. By relating racial concepts to contemporary norms of civilization and progress, it will offer a more multi-dimensional assessment of Victorian perceptions of “race” in East Asia.7 Within

3 For some recent reflections, see Hopwood, Schaffer and Secord, 2010: 231–285.
4 Beddoe, 1885. For an instructive example of the loose usage of the term “race,” see, for example, Lyall, 1915 [1902]. Stack, 2008: 219–230 is also useful in this respect.
7 For some contemporary views, see Bury, 1955 [1920]: 334–349.