Since the nineteenth century, Western racial ideology, maintaining the inherent superiority of Europeans and their civilization over the rest of the world, has been used to justify the subjugation of other peoples in the name of humanitarian motives. As they launched their imperial project at the turn of the twentieth century, Japanese leaders similarly began to form a scientific pretext for their superiority. Scholars of biology, physiology, eugenics, cultural anthropology, sociology, history, theology and linguistics argued for the unique racial origin of the Japanese and the superiority of their nation. They legitimized their leadership over other Asians with the claim that they were the first Asians to progress to a higher level of civilization alongside Westerners. In this regard modern Japan’s racial constructions seem to have evolved in the image of Western racism.

Observed carefully, the Japanese colonial empire operated within its own racial constructions. The Japanese had reason to be wary of the Western theory of innate racial differences. As long as Western racism justified the inferiority of non-whites based on skin color, the Japanese had to defy Western racism to prove their own aptitude for imperial projects. Japanese leaders of the modernization process never considered themselves inferior to Westerners, but optimistically believed that they could easily duplicate their entrepreneurship. The Meiji government taught school children that any racial differences between them and highly civilized Westerners were not innate and could be overcome by their constant effort to learn.1 Compared to their Western counterparts, Japanese views of their colonial subjects were more ambiguous and protean. After all, most of Japan’s colonial subjects were “fellow” Asians with the same skin color and cultural backgrounds. The Japanese believed that other Asians could reach their level of civilization by way of a “benevolent” Japanization program. Between 1937 and 1938, Japanese psychologist Tanaka Kan’ichi administered an I.Q.

1 Koshiro, 1999: 9–10.
test to children of various immigrant groups in North America. While he “proved” that the Japanese were the brightest, he also claimed that Chinese and Korean children scored higher than British, Nordic, German, and other European children. The Japanization [kōminka] of colonial people in Asia was practicable due to the view that “fellow” Asians were not intellectually inferior to the whites.

The Japanese as colonial masters also understood that they were not a “pure” race but rather an amalgam of races of Asia and the Pacific. Since the late nineteenth century, leading Japanese scholars such as Taguchi Ukichi (historian and economist), Torii Ryūzō (ethnologist and anthropologist), Inoue Tetsujirō (philosopher), and Tsuboi Shōgorō (physical anthropologist) had maintained that various racial and ethnic groups from the Asia-Pacific region (the Malay Archipelago, the South Sea, Mongolia, China, Korea and so on) migrated to the Japanese archipelago tens of thousands of years ago, went through generations of hybridizations, and eventually formed one nation and one people. The conception of the Japanese as an amalgamated people facilitated a vision in which the Japanese empire would ultimately become a great melting pot of the Eurasia-Pacific region, and in which colonial subjects could—and should—become Japanese.

When the Japanese realized that they would be denied equal status with whites regardless of their modernization (westernization), their nation increasingly distanced itself from the League of Nations. The Japanese people recognized that notions of the “superiority” of Japan’s modernization were bound to a Western paradigm of racial hierarchy: to deny the validity of white supremacy would be to deny their own leadership. Japan’s colonial empire never intended to exclude the white race. It adhered to the wisdom of coexistence or interdependence with the Western world.

In the 1920s and 1930s, as Japan’s colonial empire became multi-ethnic and multiracial, integrating the Chamorro and Carolinian peoples in Micronesia as well as the Russians in Manchuria, race relations within Japan’s colonial empire deviated further from the Western norm. Discrimination continued to mark the master-subject relationship. But paradoxically enough, the barrier between the colonial master and subjects became more porous in the realms of marriage, living space, labor, and cultural activity, sometimes upsetting the conventional power relations