

Beyond the Color Line: Anti-White Japanese Empire and the Making of Minzoku in Manchukuo

Abstract:

The Japanese Empire mobilized the ethnological concept “minzoku” as a means of constructing a new ethnic-racial order within the “Pan-Asianist” empire. This “Pan-Asianist” framework served as a strategic response to Western racial hierarchies that positioned Japan as inferior to “whiteness” (Kawai 2023). Based on this policy, Japan pursued policies of legal assimilation in Taiwan and Korea. Against this backdrop, a substantial body of scholarship on assimilation policies has accumulated in colonial Korea and Taiwan (Oguma 1998; Fujitani 2011; Ching 2001; Henry 2014). A similar ethnic policy was promoted in the puppet state of Manchukuo as well, with the official ideology articulated as *Minzoku Kyōwa* (Ethnic Harmony), which promised equality among ethnic groups. In practice, however, the everyday life of Manchukuo was structured by a rigid racial and ethnic hierarchy with the Japanese positioned at its apex (Young 1998, Tsukase 1998, Suzuki 2022). Scholarly attention has long focused on assimilation in Korea and Taiwan (Oguma 1998; Fujitani 2011; Ching 2001; Henry 2014), yet how Japan specifically defined and operationalized “race” and “ethnicity” in Manchukuo remains under-examined.

Drawing on newly discovered archival materials from the Manchu Ethnological Society (1943), the declassified 2,000-page report, *An Investigation of Global Policy with the Yamato Race as Nucleus*, and various scientific management studies produced by the Southern Manchuria Railway Company during 1937-1943, this research identifies two competing and often conflicting ontologies of *Minzoku* within the Japanese empire.

Extended Abstract:

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Drawing on newly discovered archival materials from the Manchu Ethnological Society (1943), the declassified 2,000-page report, *An Investigation of Global Policy with the Yamato Race as Nucleus*, and various scientific management studies produced by Southern Manchuria Railway Company during 1937-1943, this research identifies two competing and often conflicting ontologies of *Minzoku* within the Japanese empire:

- (1) The Ideological Ontology: A performative “Asian-ness” used to justify Manchukuo’s sovereignty. By framing the Japanese as “liberators” against white imperialism, the state deployed “Ethnic Harmony” as a “comforting fiction” (Young 1998) to legitimize colonial rule through a shared biological and physiological East Asian identity.
- (2) The Functional Ontology: A much more punitive application of race used in labor management. Archival records from colonial managers shows that there was a system of “scientific management” that categorized workers based on phenotypical and biological metrics (e.g., craniometry and aptitude testing). This system divided labor into “mental” versus “muscular” types to justify a discriminatory wage scale.

First, we argue that the shared “Asian-ness” is necessary for Manchukuo’s justification of national sovereignty of this contested new nation, as an effort to fit into this colonial state into a model of “nation state”. Thus, the ideology of the “Ethnic Harmony” was thus deployed in explicit contrast to what was perceived as “white imperialisms’ colonial domination in Asia”, and therefore legitimizing Japanese rule as liberatory. As a result, it functioned as what Young (1998) describes as a “comforting fiction,” enabling Japanese subjects to imagine themselves not as aggressors but as liberators of Asia. Scholarly knowledge productions, sponsored by the empire, played a key role in the formation of this new order.

The Manchukuo Society of Ethnology, for example, was established to study ethnic groups in Manchuria, including a specialized subcommittee on “race” (Kawamura 1996). This suggests that in Manchukuo as well, the concept of “race” was established as an academic object, and that practices of research and classification were institutionalized. Similarly, drawing from the Bulletin of the Manchu Ethnological Society (1943), we found that this document detailed the society’s active knowledge making, racializing, and classification projects within the Japanese Empire. Furthermore, we are examining over two thousand pages of declassified material “An Investigation of Global Policy with the Yamato Race as Nucleus: Especially Centered on Racial Population Policy”, authored by the Population and Race Section of the Ministry of Health and Welfare Research Institute. Written in the format of a scholarly paper, this document explores the racial perspectives of Western philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle and investigates ethnic groups and policies worldwide. Consequently, the text sought to articulate in a “logic” that “Japanese” people possess a mission to govern Asia.

Second, we argue that scientific knowledge produced from labor practices adopted “race” much more punitively as a tool of governance and exploitation. Through archival research based on various documents produced by colonial officials and managers in Manchukuo, we found extensive materials on the “scientific management” that actively practice categorization and classification of labor based on phenotypical and biological differences. Japanese state actors extensively practiced scientific labor management through surveying and studying the laborers in

Manchukuo. Laborers were often divided into two different groups: Manchurian and Japanese. These surveys often involved testing and different metrics of ability that these laborers could perform – brain power, intelligence, math ability, comprehending ability, memory, attention, the speed of conducting piecework, temperament, labor discipline, and etcetera.

This knowledge eventually served as justification for the different wage system within the production for laborers with different minzoku. Often, workers of Japanese origin were the top performers, whereas Manchurians (ambiguously defined) performed worse jobs and therefore received lower wages. There is a clear division between mental and muscular workers. This pattern is clear throughout the labor employment payroll system of Manchukuo. What we have seen is that usually Japanese workers occupy the highest rank positions and receive the highest payment, followed by “White” Russians who were often refugees with specific skilled technical knowledge. Then, Koreans sometimes play the role of middle managers (polices, low-ranked managers) or semi-skilled workers (wet field cultivators). Han Chinese, especially those coolies from Shandong and Hebei, typically occupied the lowest rank and performed the most intensive muscle labor.

Table 1. The Minzoku Hierarchy of Labor

Rank	Minzoku	Primary Labor Category
Highest	Japanese	Mental Labor / Management
High	“White” Russians	Skilled technical
Middle	Koreans	Semi-skilled / Middle management
Lowest	Han Chinese	Muscular Labor

Figure 1, for example, is a research study done on the workers in the electricity generation plants. Researchers deployed physiognomy, craniometry, and aptitude testing to categorize human types into “nutritional”, “muscular”, and “mental” types. This is largely associated with the attempt to categorize workers into this mental versus muscular division.

Figure 1. Physiognomic Indices and Archetypal Categorization for Labor Management

