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Often called the Land of the Rising Sun in Asia, Japan showed impressive development since the 19th century. In the process, it overthrew the former power, China, and competed to become a power in Asia that would rival those of the West. To gain legitimacy and support for its ambitious goals, Japan then proceeded to instill a self-confident, nationalistic mentality that glorified the nation and put the Japanese racial identity on a higher pedestal. First acting as the new “benevolent ruler” in the East Asia, Japan identified itself as a superior nation with a mission to shed light on inferior neighbors in the Pacific and deliver them from the Western control by means of strong force if necessary.

The racial hierarchy promoted by the Japanese had rooted from the initial aggression toward China, a country that was backward and weak in the eyes of Japan. As a country which surpassed the once big brother of Asia and even managed to defeat the Western nation of Russia, Japan displayed astonishing military capability and technology feat. To match its formidable strength, Japan also needed a strong attitude. As John Dower pointed out, “[for Japanese] it was necessary to think of oneself unique” and feel superior. After the restoration of imperial power, the Japanese celebrated and honored the emperor, who was the living descendent of Sun goddess Amaterasu, and this “emperor-centered nationalism”, along with remarkable national progress, contributed to the heightened sense of Japanese racial superiority. The Japanese believed that with great power, comes great responsibility—as the top nation in Asia, it had the obligation to civilize its neighbors. Hence, the grand concept of “The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” was promulgated by Japan in the height of its aggressive military expedition; the goal was to expand its influence to South Asia and throw off the yoke of the West order to have Asia for Asians only. According to Schoppa, the tactic used by Japan to accomplish its mission was to “seize an area, make it economically self-sufficient and defend it.”

The neighboring countries like China, Taiwan and Korea were the first victims of the Japanese ambition. The Manchukuo residents, Koreans, and Taiwanese could not rebel against these supposed reformers who controlled them with an iron fist. The native revolts were brutally struck down and repressed; assimilation attempts and cultural enforcements were implemented; education systems in the colonies were censored and modified in the way that discouraged the development of nationalism. Requiring complete compliance and absolute surrender to its rule regardless of the colonies’ opinion about the Japanese mission, Japan uprooted government structures and caused mass migration in conquered nations. As a superior, Japan attempted to educate and reform the inferior ones by force. The Nanjing Massacre showed how brutal the Japanese soldiers were in their endeavor to demoralize the Chinese and showcase their supreme military power. Due to Japan’s racist contempt for its Asian counterparts, Japan carried out bloody atrocities with no guilt and shame. The Chinese greatly suffered in the hands of the Japanese, and so did many others. The Southeast natives, previously ruled by the Westerners, first welcomed the Japanese as liberators but later became dissatisfied by Japan’s brutality. In spite of the fact that the Japanese did shed blood in the name of their emperor and noble mission, it was also evident that they did partially fulfill their commitment to the conquered nations. Colonies like Korea and Taiwan benefited from Japanese investments of roads, schools, hospitals, railroads, communications, buildings, and infrastructure. All of these paved the way for the nations’ industrial investment and growth, and agricultural development and productivity.

In “Teaching War”, Japanese historian Ienaga Saburo commented that it’s a complete lie to say that the Japanese aggression arose from the belief that Japan was to liberate Asians from the control of the U.S. and Europe. It is indeed true that while Japan emphasized its role as a crusader, it also stressed its national needs of extracting resources. In resource-rich Taiwan, necessities like sugar and rice were almost entirely exported to Japan by 1902. Both Korea and Taiwan also provided human resources as well when Japan needed to mobilize mass number of people from both colonies and mainland in preparation for the Pacific War. These forced volunteers often became laborers working at the war factories and soldiers serving on the battlefields. When the embargo was imposed by the U.S., Japan turned to colonies in the Southeast Asia for resources such as rubber and petroleum. In addition to being the target of resource exploitation, the colonies themselves became the manufacturing grounds and military bases for the Japanese.

The Japanese view of racial hierarchy, which placed Japan as the supreme Asian nation with power equal to that of the Western colonial nations, was endorsed to stir up public support, fully mobilize and rally the populace for Japan’s empire building project. Identifying itself as a predominant Asian nation with a duty to disintegrate Western imperialism in Asia and embrace Pan-Asianism, Japan strived to bring the weaker countries under the emperor’s benevolent rule and modernize them for their sake, and at the same time pursued its own imperialistic interests. Japan’s racist contempt and firm determination to assert its prestige in Asia through complete dominance bore mixed results. Under Japanese presence, the colonies experienced suppression and bloodshed that was justified and propagated in the name of the sacred emperor, but also in the process received investments that prepared them for development and incentive that started their struggle for independence.