RACISM AND THE PACIFIC WAR: 
WHAT OUR PUPILS SHOULD KNOW

by
Mrs Soon-Lee Lay Hong, Bishan Park Secondary School
and Dr Goh Chor Boon, National Institute of Education

In a letter justifying his decision to drop the atomic bomb on the
Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, U.S. President Harry S.
Truman wrote:
The only language [the Japanese] seem to understand is the one we have
been using to bombard them. When you have to deal with a beast you
have to treat him as a beast. It is most regrettable but nevertheless
true. 1

Such was the racial overtone that prevailed throughout the years of
conflict between the Anglo-Americans and the Japanese in Asia.
Following the attack of Pearl Harbour, long-standing antipathies of
Westerners towards members of coloured races in general, and East
Asians in particular, were focused on the Japanese. In Asia, Japan was
castigated for subjugating the native people of Dutch Indonesia,
British Hong Kong, Malaya and Burma, America's Philippines, and French
Indochina. The string of Japanese military successes destroyed the
notions of racial superiority and invincibility of the Western
imperialists. The Allied Powers were beaten and humiliated by an Asian
power, before the eyes of their colonial subjects. It was not so much
about the loss of territory to Japan, but about the loss of prestige.
That is why, for the British authorities, the real impact of the loss
of the "impregnable fortress" of Singapore was "not a strategic one,
but a moral one".

Western elites, especially those in the military, interpreted the
conflicts and tensions in the Far East and the Pacific through the
prism of race. The British politician Antony Eden stressed the
importance of "effectively asserting white-race authority in the Far
East".2 In 1939, Sir Frederick Maze, a prominent British official in
China, described the escalating turmoil as "not merely Japan against
Great Britain" but also "the Orient against the Occident - the Yellow
race against the White race".3 In American General John DeWitt's view,
the menace posed by the Japanese would continue "until they are wiped
off the face of the map"; after all, "A Jap's a Jap".4

The Japanese were commonly perceived as "the little men" - primitive,
childish, and mad. They were frequently dehumanised to become apes and
monkeys.5
President Roosevelt, for example, seriously endorsed the information
provided by a physical anthropologist at the Smithsonian Institution
that Japanese skulls were "some 2,000 years less developed than ours
On the British side, Winston Churchill was always noted for espousing the blunt racial attitudes of his Edwardian background, disparaging Asian peoples as "dirty baboos" and "chinks". The simian image was given full coverage in Western iconography. On the eve of the abject British surrender to Japan in Singapore and Malaya, the British humour magazine Punch depicted Japanese soldiers in full-page display as chimpanzees with helmets and guns swinging from tree to tree.

A facet of the Pacific War that has no exact counterpart in the European theatre of conflict was the mutilation of Japanese dead for souvenirs or trophies. It was a popular activity among U.S. combatants because they were not killing men but "wiping out dirty animals".6 Skulls, noses, ears, teeth, and other portions of the Japanese anatomy were prized as symbols of victorious confrontations with a subhuman foe. An American serviceman sent President Roosevelt a letter opener carved from the bone of a dead Japanese, and Life magazine published a full-page photograph of an attractive blonde posing with a Japanese skull she had received from her fiancé in the Pacific.7

While the Japanese were not good in belittling the Americans (and other races) and saddling them with contemptuous stereotypes, racism also influenced their perception of Self and Other. Although the Meiji period witnessed rapid industrialisation and "Westernisation", the Japanese were painfully aware that they still were regarded as immature, unimaginative and unstable. As the old Japanese saying goes, they were "Good in small things and small in the great things". Thus, by the twentieth century, Japan's success in resisting Western colonialism and emerging as one of the so-called Great Powers had instilled among the Japanese an attitude towards weaker peoples and nations as arrogant and contemptuous as the racism of the Westerners. There was an unmistakable sense of racial revenge. At the same time, the Japanese wrestled with the task of elevating the Self - the "Yamato race" (Yamato minzoku), the "pure race", the "leading race", unique among the races and cultures of the world, and why this uniqueness made them superior. Certain visual images, such as the sun, sword, cherry blossom, snow-capped Mt Fuji, an abstract "brightness", and auspicious colours like red and white, were used as symbols of the purity of the Japanese spirit. Such intense cultural fixations on the notion of purity and the self contributed to a wartime record of extremely hard and brutal behaviour towards non-Japanese.

The Japanese in World War Two became the nightmare come true of the Yellow Peril. This apocalyptic image made unmistakably clear that racial hatreds, and not merely war hatreds or responses to Japanese behaviour alone, were at issue. This concept of the Yellow Peril is still subtly emphasised in international relations, especially between
the United States and Japan in their race for economic and technological control of the world today. Though the simian image of the Japanese is now not used, the "little men" connotation is still popular with political cartoonists. Historical legacies branded them as latecomers to the modern challenges of science and technology; they were mere imitators rather than innovators, ritualists rather than rationalists. Thus, more often than not, Japanese figures are drawn as dwarfish in size.

Pedagogical Implications

It is interesting to note that there is no mention of the issue of racism in World War Two in the history textbooks used in Singapore's secondary schools. Why is this so? Is it because of the sensitivity generated by the teaching and learning of such a theme within a multi-racial society? Is it because the curriculum planners feel that our pupils are too young to understand and appreciate such "adult" issues? One can only guess the reasons. In any case, it is our contention that an open discussion of racism and the racial thinking behind the atrocities of the Pacific War (and not forgetting Hitler's extermination of the Jews and the Russians) has its educational values. Such discussions provide opportunities for pupils to explore and debate on historical controversies and, on a more philosophical level, the question of how men should live. With this in mind, we decided to conduct two lessons specifically based on the racial animosity between the Americans and the Japanese in the outbreak of the Pacific War. Out of three secondary four classes, we randomly selected one class of thirty-eight pupils. The pupils had no prior knowledge that "racism" was the key issue to be tackled.

The first lesson was based on a teacher-centred approach. This method was selected because we wanted students to understand that the racial animosity between the Americans and the Japanese did not start in 1940 but way before, when Japan felt that the Yamato race was being discriminated by the world's leading Western nations. Hence, the historical facts leading to the outbreak of the Pacific War was narrated. Particular attention was given to the changing perceptions between the Western nations (in particular, the United States) and Japan as a result of significant events which took place since Japan's surprise victory over the Russian Baltic fleet at the Straits of Tsushima in 1902. The lesson was spiced with interesting anecdotes in order to sustain pupils' interest. At the same time, we intentionally build up the tension of the inevitability of total war between Japan and the United States. The inevitable collision reached its height with the U.S.'s embargo placed on Japan's importation of certain raw materials, especially oil. The climatic ending was the treacherous and ungentlemanly (in the eyes of the Americans) bombing of Pearl Harbour on December 8, 1941. Throughout the lesson, it was observed that the
pupils (especially the boys) were listening intently to the development of events. Some wanted to ask questions but we suppressed this desire because we wanted to maintain the tone and tension of the narration. The lesson ended on a rather morbid note - President Roosevelt receiving from his marines in the Pacific theatre of war a letter opener skilfully craved out of the bones of a Japanese soldier - and the question, "What happened to the minds of those at war?"

The second lesson was an interactive session during which students' responses were constantly elicited. It was largely based on eight political graphics. The assumption is that political cartoons are useful stimulus materials for developing in pupils the skill of analysing historical evidence. They provide students (and teachers) with a humorous glimpse of significant historical and contemporary events. An instructional model was used to establish the impact of each cartoon. Essentially, it focuses on the symbols and caricatures and the ideas behind them. Four sets of questions were developed to be used in conjunction with each cartoon:

*What do you see when you look at this cartoon?*
(The purpose is to have the students identify specific details in the cartoon.)

*What is the issue?*
(The purpose is to have the students synthesise the details into an issue.)

*What is the point of view of the cartoonist?*
(The purpose is to have the students differentiate between the issue and the bias of the cartoonist.)

*What is your reaction to this cartoon?*
(The purpose is to have the students personalise the information obtained from the cartoon and relate it to the topic of discussion.)

The pupils' understanding of the topic was greatly enhanced by the narration of the historical content in the previous lesson. Hence, it was not surprising that pupils' responses to the questions were both spontaneous and fairly accurate. Towards the end of the lesson, the teacher summarised the various elements of American-Japanese racism in the Pacific War. Two questions were then shown on a transparency: Why must there be war? How should men live? We hope to get the pupils thinking that, while racism is a sensitive issue especially in a multi-racial, multi-cultural society like Singapore, young people must have an idea of its deadly impact (as shown in the millions killed in World War Two) on the human mind. Racism still persists in many parts of the world today and it must be faced squarely.
2 As quoted in ibid., p.20.
3 As quoted in ibid., p.20.
7 Dower, War Without Mercy, p. 65.