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# Japan and the Blind Spot Around Nuclear Racism

Nakamura Taira

## Introduction

Japan's limited recognition of the atomic bombings as an act of nuclear racism or colonialism can be approached through four interrelated factors: the influence of the United States of America (below, US) on postwar political, educational, and cultural narratives; a distinctly Japanese tendency to conflate wartime disasters with natural disasters, which can obscure the role of human agency and power dynamics; a psychological reluctance among many Japanese people to accept the implications of being on the losing side in war; and the broader fact that, both globally and within Japan, frameworks for recognizing racism and colonialism are relatively new and not yet widely circulated. For those of us engaged in university education, Japan's historically rooted lack of recognition of racism and colonialism remains a critical concern. This issue is tied to the ways knowledge is produced and circulated, with mass media also playing a significant role in shaping public understanding.

Before analyzing these four factors, it is important to clarify my own position: I was born in Tokyo, and after graduating from university I went to Taiwan, where I researched Japanese colonial rule over the highland Indigenous peoples with a focus on Japanese colonialism and decolonization (Nakamura 2018). After subsequently teaching for four years at a university in South Korea and other places, I moved to Hiroshima, where I have now lived for a decade, and where I teach East Asian history, culture, and peace studies at Hiroshima University. My reflections on racism and colonialism in Japan resonate with Elaine Scarry's (2020) analysis of the genealogy of racism in the United States. Scarry traces a continuum between the atomic bombings of Japan, an act she situates within a framework of US "white supremacy," and the 2020 murder of George Floyd. In her account, racism functions by rendering certain human lives disposable or expendable. In the US, she argues, this logic is inseparable from the country's hegemonic nuclear order, which in turn intersects with the longer histories of Japanese imperialism and its racialized treatment of those deemed "non-Japanese."

## The Influence of the US on Japan

After the Asia-Pacific War, or World War II, Japan was occupied by the US and the Allied powers until 1952. On the same day the 1951 San Francisco

Peace Treaty was signed, Japan concluded the US–Japan Security Treaty, which, revised in 1960, remains in force today. Fearing the spread of communism, Japan aligned itself with the US and has maintained that orientation for the past eighty years. This trajectory reflects a long-standing convergence of interests between the ruling elites of both countries, during which Japan’s left-wing and anti-establishment movements have repeatedly lost ground. The US relied on Japan’s ruling class, including the emperor, as instruments of postwar governance and positioned Japan as a bulwark against communism, as became especially clear during the Korean War of the 1950s. Under strong US influence, the promotion of “peaceful” nuclear power, specifically, nuclear power plants, also became a major feature of postwar Japanese society, a development whose consequences became starkly visible on March 11, 2011, with the Fukushima nuclear explosion. In the Japanese public consciousness, many people seem to feel that Japan cannot truly stand up to the US. As of 2025, the US continues to maintain numerous military bases throughout Japan and conducts flights without restriction. Nuclear weapons have also entered Japan, with the Japanese government tacitly accepting their presence.

### **Natural / Wartime Disasters**

Because Japanese society has lived with typhoons, earthquakes and tsunamis for centuries, it is often said that there exists a certain resignation toward natural disasters. The problem, however, is a persistent tendency to conflate human-made catastrophes, including those caused by war, with natural disasters. This tendency has the troubling effect of obscuring the human agents responsible for wartime destruction. As is well known, the inscription on the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Cenotaph exemplifies this issue: “Let all the souls here rest in peace, for we shall not repeat the evil.” Here, the subject responsible for dropping the atomic bomb is absent, and accountability dissolves into prayer. This emotional tenor of the Japanese language, along with the broader cultural disposition it reflects, inhibits a clear pursuit of wartime responsibility. The same pattern is evident in efforts to assign responsibility for the March 2011 nuclear power plant meltdown in Fukushima (cf. Sakai 2017). The liability of Tokyo Electric Power Company and the Japanese government has been effectively nullified in the courts, and citizens are being guided by the ruling elite to accept nuclear contamination as a national calamity that all must endure. The history of colonialism surrounding the Fukushima nuclear accident is beginning to be reexamined. During a recent talk at the Citizens’ Nuclear Information Center, Fukui Tomoki discussed how the colonial ruling structures surround nuclear power and the Fukushima nuclear incident in Japan.

### **The Psychological Reluctance**

In Japanese society, the prevailing view is not that Japan was “defeated” (敗戦 *haisen*) but that the war was “brought to an end” (終戦 *shūsen*). The language is consequential. Each year on August 15, Japan commemorates “the anniversary of the end of the war,” a phrasing that, linked to the second issue discussed

above, frames the war as a kind of natural disaster that has simply passed. While this can be understood as a psychological defense against violence and trauma, it nonetheless obscures a clear grasp of history. Coupled with postwar pacifism, symbolized by Article 9 of the Constitution, it has left little space for rigorous or critical examination of the military and of defeat. A further obstacle to historical clarity is the lack of recognition that Japan is, in practice, jointly shaped by the ruling elites of both Japan and the US. This dynamic makes it difficult for many Japanese to perceive the atomic bombings as acts rooted in racism or colonial power. The absence of agents of resistance is likewise tied to the fact that the Communist Party's influence has been only fleeting. One might say that a model of rational individuals acting on principle is ill-fitted to the village-like structures of Japanese society. Of course, these social and cultural patterns are products of geopolitical and historical formation; I am not proposing an essentialist account of "Japanese culture."

### **Delayed Historical Responsibility in Japan**

One important milestone in the international development of public discourse on racism and colonialism was the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, held in Durban, South Africa. Although the event was momentous in scope and ambition, its global influence was substantially weakened when the US and Israel staged a highly publicized walkout midway through the proceedings. Further diminishing its impact, the 9/11 attacks occurred just three days after the conference concluded, abruptly shifting the priorities of governments, media, and the public worldwide. Within this rapidly changing global environment, where new frameworks for understanding racism and colonialism were only beginning to take shape, Japan, too, found itself constrained by long-standing conceptual and political limitations. In Japan, "race" has historically been understood through a simplified, tripartite schema of "white," "yellow," and "black." This reductive framework has contributed to persistent blindness regarding other forms of structural discrimination. For example, prejudice against *Buraku* outcast communities, or anti-Asian discrimination by Japanese people themselves, has often not been recognized as racism at all (Kurokawa 2016). The underlying logic has been: "Because they are the same race, racial discrimination cannot exist." Such assumptions have long obscured the complex ways racism and coloniality operate domestically. Only in recent years, partly influenced by global movements, such as Black Lives Matter, and by increasing public debate over Japan's own colonial past, has broader awareness of racism begun to take root in Japanese society.

Japan's muted response to Israel's racist and colonial policies toward Palestinians is inseparable from the racism and colonialism that shaped the atomic bombings. Israel's system of racism and colonial domination is deeply tied to that of the US, and Japan's unwillingness, both at the governmental and university levels, to confront these issues reflects a long-standing pattern: Japan has avoided holding the US accountable for its own racism, including the racism embedded in the atomic bombings, and has instead consistently aligned itself with US imperial desires.

## Biography

**Nakamura** (family name) **Taira** (individual name) is now teaching at the Humanities program, Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Hiroshima University since 2016. Born in Tokyo, Japan, lived in several places in Japan and also Taiwan, USA, Korea and Aotearoa NZ.

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