

# The Racial Equality Issue and Konoe Fumimaro\*

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## Abstract

Konoe Fumimaro served three times as Japan's prime minister in the crucial years before World War II. At the end of World War I, as Japan was preparing to take part in the Paris Peace Conference at Versailles of 1919, Konoe Fumimaro published his famous article titled "Eibei hon'i no heiwashugi o haisu [A Rejection of the Anglo-American-Centered Peace Ideology]." In this article and his observations on post-WWI Europe and the United States, he often praises U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. Konoe clearly was fascinated by and attracted to the American President, and felt a closeness and sympathy with his views. It seems that in some ways the two men had some things in common. The arguments and world views of both men were extremely idealistic. But even Wilson's ideals, in the world of 1919, where the lingering influence of the old regime remained strong, ultimately did not become a reality at that time. Wilson died before he could complete his dream. Similarly, Konoe's ideals stood no chance of being realized, given the changes of the times and the development of Japan's militaristic foreign policy. For both Konoe and Wilson, racial equality in 1919 was a distant ideal. Focusing on Konoe Fumimaro, this article discusses the issues surrounding Japan's racial equality proposal of 1919.

Today I want to discuss some of my own views of the issues surrounding Japan's racial equality proposal of 1919 by focusing on one individual, Konoe Fumimaro.

As you are doubtlessly aware, Konoe served three times as Japan's prime minister in the crucial years before World War II. He had a very close connection with Kyoto, the city where we meet today. At Omuro in the north of this city is housed the Yōmei Bunko archive. The site was originally one of the residences of the Konoe family and the present collection dates to 1938, when Konoe Fumimaro built an archive there to store documents and other items relating to the Fujiwara clan and Konoe family from throughout history to modern times. Today the archive is an important resource for researchers.

I will draw on a number of quotations in my presentation. Most of these are drawn from the book *Saigo no gozen kaigi: Sengo Ōbei kenbunroku* [The Last Imperial Conference: Memoirs of Postwar Europe and America]. This was published four years ago in paperback by Chūōkōron-Shinsha, and is listed at the head of my list of sources at the end of this paper. The book is still

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available and I recommend it highly to anyone interested in learning more about the subject.

## Introduction

At the end of World War I, as Japan was preparing to take part in the Paris Peace Conference at Versailles of 1919, Konoe Fumimaro published his famous article titled “Eibei hon’i no heiwashugi o haisu [A Rejection of the Anglo-American-Centered Peace Ideology].”

There has been a tendency to emphasize the radical aspects of this article and underline the ways in which it marked a break from the status quo. This view is based on a focus on what came next, on Japan’s rush to war between Japan and China and the Tripartite Pact, both of which Konoe worked on. Of course, this is indeed one aspect of the article. But I have always felt that the article is much more multi-faceted than this view allows.

## 1. Three Aspects

Let’s begin, for example, by looking at the article in the context of the racial equality issue. The essay contains the following passage: “Therefore, at the coming peace conference, if we are to join the League of Nations, issues that Japan must raise as priorities include, at the very least, the eradication of economic imperialism and nondiscriminatory treatment for the yellow and white races.” Why did Konoe mention the scrapping of discrimination between the yellow and white races as his second point? My analysis of the background to Konoe’s writings at the time makes me think that three factors played a part.

### 1) The Universalist Aspect: Possibilities and Limitations

Probably the biggest factor was the universalist aspect. It goes without saying that Konoe was influenced and inspired during his days as a university student by the humanitarian socialism of thinkers like Kawakami Hajime. This was an important influence on him from an early young age, and meant that he saw the issue of racial discrimination from this humanitarian angle. For example, he wrote: “This is a serious humanitarian issue that no person with a sense of justice should overlook, whether he be Asiatic himself or not.” He also wrote: “Surely democracy and humanitarianism essentially stem from a feeling that all human beings are equal. Within the country, this means popular rights and freedom; internationally, it means appealing to equal rights to life of all races and all peoples.”

I use the term “universal” here because there is no suggestion here that Konoe is making these claims to protect Japan’s interests in particular. The target of his article is the arrogance and high-handedness of Great Britain and the other European powers. But he also has criticisms for Japan’s own continental policy, which has followed the example of the Western powers. He writes critically of the policy, and describes it as one of aggressive invasion and militarism. The creation of a new League of Nations, he says, will sweep away this old system and replace it with something new. But he warns that although the idea of a League of Nations is a good thing in itself, it might easily be used as a tool to protect the selfish interests of Great Britain. To ensure that this does not happen, Konoe sets his hopes on the emerging power of the United States, and particularly its President, Woodrow Wilson.

At the risk of seeming to focus on a small detail of usage, I think it is interesting to notice the exact expression Konoe uses: he talks of an *Ei-Bei* (Anglo-American)-centered peace: not *Bei-Ei* (U.S.-British) or *Ei-Futsu* (Anglo-French). I think it is fair to assume that this was no accident and that there was an intentional nuance behind this choice of phrasing.

The historical moment seemed to offer the possibility for spreading universal values in the future. But at the same time, limitations remained due to circumstances of the times. What were these limitations? In his speech outlining the Fourteen Points, President Wilson mentioned national movements and the liberation of the colonized around the world. Konoe felt that the

President's speech had been touched by concern for these groups. Nevertheless, he writes: "Even so, with the exception of the movement in Ireland, these independence movements are hardly worth speaking of. In March last year, Koreans took opportunity of the riots, and joined in calls with the provisional government in Shanghai, talking passionately of independence inspired by the image of the Freedom Bell in Philadelphia. But these passions soon waned and nothing more was heard of them," he writes.

In other words, essentially he is saying that the independence movement in Japan's colony of Korea is hardly worthy of being taken seriously. Of course, this attitude could not be concealed from the other side. In China, Chen Duxiu criticized not Konoe's article in particular but Japan's proposals for racial equality by saying, "If we as Asiatics cannot break through the special positions enjoyed by certain races in China, or the subordination in Korea, how can we hope to demand equal treatment?" He argues, in other words, that without bringing down Japanese control, the proposal amounts to little more than empty rhetoric. I think it is fair to say that although there were universalist elements in Konoe's thinking on these matters, there were certainly also limitations.

## **2) The Economic Aspect: Immigration**

The second element is the economic aspect of immigration. However, as Professor Nakanishi Hiroshi has shown in the paper cited in the reference materials, in 1919 the population issue was not yet an especially critical issue for Japan. Even if this economic aspect was not particularly strong, nevertheless I think we can consider it as one factor.

## **3) The Ethnic/National Aspect: Opposition to Racial and State Discrimination (State Prestige or "Face")**

The third is the question of the dignity or "face" of the state or nation. In particular, as Hashikawa Bunzō wrote, Konoe "had a fierce pride in the nobility of Japan as the highest example within the yellow peoples of Asia." It is likely, as this remark suggests, that Konoe felt a keener sense of anger at discrimination at the hands of whites than most other Japanese.

Eventually, Konoe became the only Japanese prime minister to take his own life. No doubt there were several factors that led him to decide to kill himself, but I think certainly this must have been one of them. He found himself arrested, imprisoned, and tried by the GHQ, by the United States, by white people, and he was quite simply unable to tolerate the disgrace of it—that is more or less what he wrote himself, and I think we should not ignore the racial or ethno-nationalist aspects of this. Nevertheless, I believe that the universalist aspect was the most important.

One thing that is perhaps surprising is the absence of any real evidence of Pan-Asianist thought in his writing at this stage, given the importance this would have for Konoe at a later stage. How to define Pan-Asianism is another matter. But if we define it as the idea of Japanese and Chinese uniting as Asians to resist and oppose the West, then any arguments along these lines are almost totally missing from the article, and I think this is another of the characteristics of his thinking at this stage.

## **2. Different Responses in Different Countries**

### **1) Foreign Responses**

Next, I would like to look at the various responses to the article in foreign countries, starting with *Millard's Review*, the English-language newspaper in Shanghai. The paper took a very critical view, saying that Konoe had not only criticized Great Britain but also shown hints of sympathy with Germany's position, and that his skeptical attitude to the peace created by the allied powers

posed a problem for the conference.

Guy Morrison Walker, the well-known American legalist, read Konoe's article and was astonished by it, saying that it illustrated "Japan's duplicity." What did he mean by this? Walker criticized Japan calling for racial equality while approving of colonial rule and continuing to hold its own colonies. Both of these sources were extremely critical of Konoe's article.

## **2) Reunion with Sun Yat-sen in Shanghai**

After writing the article Konoe met Sun Yat-sen again in Shanghai on his way to the Paris Peace Conference at Versailles. He later remembered his conversation with Sun Yat-sen in the following terms: "I spoke with Sun Yat-sen and our conversation touched on the national awakening of peoples in East and West, speaking with great passion and fervor, our conversation never waning until late into the night." This reference to national awakenings certainly gives the impression that the two men spoke of racial equality and Pan-Asianism. But other historical materials we have suggest that in fact the two men mostly discussed their shared opposition to Great Britain. They agreed that Great Britain represented imperialism, while the United States offered hope as a country of freedom and equality.

And this is an interesting point. Sun Yat-sen told Konoe that the global situation after the Great War was one in which the weaker countries should exploit the gaps between Great Britain and the United States and build a new world together with the United States. But, as Konoe himself wrote later, this prediction of Sun Yat-sen's did not come true. The reason was that the Washington Naval Conference and the system that came into being after it brought the United States and Great Britain together. Konoe wrote that in fact no opportunity presented itself for taking advantage of any gap between the two powers. In any case, racial equality was part of his hope in the United States at the time and I think this was an area in which he and Sun Yat-sen would have been in sympathy.

Later, the political scientist Matsumoto Sannosuke pointed out that Konoe's article was characterized by contrasting elements, partly driven by the idea of expanding the Japanese race but at the same time motivation by anti-imperialism. For this reason, he writes that perhaps one reason why Sun Yat-sen showed interest in Konoe was that he was drawn into Konoe's arguments, which could not be dismissed as mere camouflage for the idea of Japanese racial expansion. They also perhaps contained other possibilities. And this, I think, perhaps suggests something close to what I have argued, namely that Konoe's arguments contained a universalist aspect, and that there were two sides to this: possibilities and limitations.

## **3. The Paris Peace Conference and Konoe's Memoirs of Postwar Europe and America**

### **1) Disappointment and Hopes for Wilsonian Idealism**

Next, I would like to look at the Paris Peace Conference and Konoe's memoirs of postwar Europe and America. Konoe took part in the conference himself. The pamphlet for this symposium had the picture from the time on its cover. Konoe Fumimaro is shown in this picture to the left and diagonally above Saionji Kinmochi, in the center of the photograph. The racial equality proposal failed to be approved, of course—something that Konoe described as "the most naked expression of the principle of the rule by power."

But that was not all. He also argued that it should be viewed positively, in some respects: "At least the principle of self-determination of nations espoused by President Wilson has been the central animating spirit of the peace conference to some degree, and to the many weaker colonized nations who have suffered for many years under oppressive regimes, this has given new hope and light." He also wrote: "It would be premature to claim that the results of the



Paris Peace Conference mark the destruction of idealism. We must not forget that we today are still at a transitional stage in the development of international politics.” Even though the racial equality proposal had been defeated, he said, people should not give up, because this was just a transitional stage, and that the issue would be progress farther in the future in the next phase of developments.

## **2) Criticisms of Japan: Konoe’s October 1921 Speech titled “Kokusairen’mei no seishin ni tsuite [On the Spirit of the League of Nations]”**

Earlier I referred to criticisms of Japan. Already at this time, Konoe was arguing that Japan’s policy of invasion and militarism since the Russo-Japanese War had led to its isolation on the world stage. He said: “Those who looked with disapproval at the hit and grab conduct of our military clique in China and Siberia could not but feel grievous sadness and regret in the face of these attacks.” In other words, at the same time as calling for racial equality, Konoe at this time was ready to direct his criticism at Japan itself for its aggressions on the Asian mainland.

## **3) Strong Interest in Race Issues**

Another aspect that is often remarked on with regard to Konoe in these years is the frequency of his remarks about race issues. Here again I will quote from what he wrote: “There are perhaps various reasons for this (U.S. exclusionary policies against Japan) but racial prejudice is surely one of them.” He also raises the problem of the discriminatory treatment of black people in the United States. In particular, after the Paris Peace Conference he stopped by the United States on his way back to Japan, and writes that he sensed keenly how race prejudice became stronger as he traveled from Paris to London and from London to New York. He specifically mentions the concrete problem of discrimination against black people.

It is interesting that he writes here “the reasons for the exclusionary policies against Japan.” What does it mean? At the time, public opinion in the United States was set tough against Japan for its behavior over Shandong. Konoe gives several reasons for this, and one factor that he mentions alongside racial prejudice is that of Chinese propaganda. There is a sense that his understanding of China and Korea, and his awareness of the issues of racial prejudice, have somehow become tangled and contradictory.

When the movement to exclude Japan from the United States was at its height, Konoe suggested several reasons for it. One of them concerned the poor quality of Japanese students

studying in the United States. This too was in 1919. He says that American society is shaped by the educated classes, and that it is students who have the biggest impact on the intellectuals of a country. If we consider this, he says, the current situation with Japanese students in the United States is really not satisfactory. What about the situation today? I think Japan is around eighth or ninth in terms of the number of students it has studying in the United States. We are quite weak both in terms of quality and quantity. Perhaps Konoe's observations still have pearls of wisdom to offer us today.

#### **4. Prelude to the Greater East Asia War: Changes from the 1930s**

##### **1) Emphasis on the Economy: From the Universalist Logic of the “Have-Not” Countries to the Defense of Japan’s Continental Policy**

Next, I want to look at what we might call the prelude to the Greater East Asia War: a period in which the world shifted from a period of international cooperation in the 1920s, through the Great Depression, into a period of economic nationalism leading up to the war. The world went in a direction other than the one Konoe had imagined, and his thinking and tone also changed over this time.

What we described as the universalist aspect of his earlier discourse disappears in these years, and he begins to plead more strongly on behalf of Japan's position. He starts unashamedly to argue that it is justified for Japan, as one of the have-nots, to encroach onto the continent. For example, he says: “The annual addition of nearly a million people to our population means that the economic livelihoods of the people are placed under extreme pressure . . . since there is no possibility that these two great principles can be made a reality in the near future, we have been forced to chose expansion into Manchuria and Mongolia as our only path to surviving today.”

The two principles he refers to here are economic and trade freedom and freedom of immigration. And this is something extremely interesting, I think. In his article “Eibei hon'i no heiwashugi o haisu” which we looked at earlier, Konoe cited two principles: abolishing economic imperialism and equal treatment with no discrimination between the yellow and white races. The idea of abolishing economic imperialism is more or less the same as the idea of economic and trade freedom. But the earlier idea of racial equality has changed, to become “freedom of immigration.” And I think this is one place where we can see that the focus of Konoe's interest has shifted. This demand for freedom of immigration is really being driven by Japan's economy, and from the sole perspective of finding a solution to Japan's population problem. I think probably it is fair to say that by this stage the universalist aspects we saw earlier have disappeared.

As an extension of this, in 1937 he formed the first Konoe cabinet. At the time, the main policies of the cabinet were to achieve “true peace based on international justice” and “true peace that goes beyond simply maintaining the status quo.” What did this mean in concrete terms? It meant that the current world situation was extremely unfair in terms of the distribution of territory, and that it was necessary to correct this injustice. Specifically, it was necessary to redistribute the colonies. But that was simply a fantasy. And so, as a second-best solution, Japan would have to work to secure resources, to open up markets for Japanese manufactured goods, and to make freedom of immigration and free movement of labor a reality. These policies were central to the direction of the cabinet, and were basically essentially an extension of the two great principles we have just seen.

The critic Kiyosawa Kiyoshi critiqued this policy direction, saying that although Konoe's arguments made a certain amount of sense, it was questionable whether Japan had any right to force other nations to suffer sacrifices simply so that Japan itself could prosper. Japan was a have-not country by comparison with world powers like Great Britain and the United States. But other countries had even less than Japan. Kiyosawa argued that Japan apparently felt no compunction

about exerting control over these weaker countries and taking from them what it could get. I think it is fair to say that this critique sees through to the problems of Konoe's arguments, at least from one angle.

## 2) The Rise of Pan-Asianism

Then, roughly a month later, war broke out between Japan and China. And just from around this time Konoe's arguments in favor of Pan-Asianism start to become much stronger. Why? Because ultimately the antagonisms between Japan and China will develop through war with China into conflict with the West. And this will give rise to a conflict between the white race and the yellow race of Japan. This means that a resolution has to be found somehow to the war with China. And the appeal to Pan-Asian sentiment was used as a logical explanation toward that end.

In terms of the Pan-Asianism that emerged in the second half of the 1930s, therefore, I think it cannot be denied that at least in part it was something that emerged from the war with China, in the context of Japan as one of the have-not countries. The culmination of this was the declaration of a "New Order in East Asia" in November 1938. It is no exaggeration to say that this declaration lacked almost entirely any of the limitations previously seen with relation to Japan.

### **Conclusion: Significance and Limitations (Japan and the International Society)**

Professor Nakanishi, who gave the keynote address today, pointed out in the conclusion to his paper analyzing Konoe's arguments on racial equality that at the same time as aiming to deepen Wilsonian universalism from the perspective of civilization, they also treated Japan as a special case and was designed to suit Japan's own interests. Even if his arguments did have some justice, there was no way they could ever have become the foundations for a universal international order. At least until the 1920s in particular, Konoe's arguments did have a certain level of universality and reasonableness, but from the 1930s on, with the revolutionary changes and shifts of the times, his arguments lost that aspect of universality. And, as Professor Nakanishi indicated, his arguments from this time on could only really be thought of in Japan-centric terms.

Professor Ōnuma Yasuaki, who passed away recently, wrote about the objective conditions that prevailed when the treaty was signed at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. He says that although Japan had become one of the "Big Five" member countries, among the colored races of the world Japan was still the only one with any say or influence, and most regions of the world were still controlled by racially prejudiced whites. And since Japan could not hope to pursue universal values, it was ultimately forced back on its own national interest. Problems existed both with the state of international society and with Japan's own thinking, and as a result, the idea of racial equality had only a slim chance of ever becoming a reality. It was a "distant ideal," as he put it.

Throughout Konoe's articles on rejecting the Anglo-American-centered peace and his observations on post-WWI Europe and the United States, he often praises U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. Konoe clearly was fascinated by and attracted to the American President, and felt a closeness and sympathy with his views, and it seems to me that in some ways in one aspect the two men had some things in common. The arguments and world views of both men were extremely idealistic. But even Wilson's ideals, in the world of 1919, where the lingering influence of the old regime remained strong, ultimately did not become a reality at that time.

Wilson died before he could complete his dream. Similarly, Konoe's ideals stood no chance of being realized, given the changes of the times and the development of Japan's militaristic foreign policy. For both Konoe and Wilson, racial equality in 1919 was a distant ideal. But with the passage of time, I believe, the ideals that these two men espoused were eventually realized in the years after World War II.

## References

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