

Document 7.8: Excerpts from “The Yellow Peril,” an essay by Jack London, 1904

In 1904, the famous American author Jack London served as a war correspondent for the Russo-Japanese War. His essay “The Yellow Peril” appeared at a time when discrimination against the Chinese in the United States was already heightened, evident in legislation such as the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act (which limited immigration) as well as many other forms of racism.

“The Yellow Peril” was not included in London’s book of collected works. For much of his essay, London wrote about how he saw the Japanese; however, he writes of the Chinese, too.

Here we have the Chinese, four hundred million of him, occupying a vast land of immense natural resources—resources of a twentieth century age, of a machine age; resources of coal and iron, which are the backbone of commercial civilization. He is an indefatigable worker. He is not dead to new ideas, new methods, new systems. Under a capable management he can be made to do anything. Truly would he of himself constitute the much-heralded Yellow Peril were it not for his present management. This management, his government, is set, crystallized. It is what binds him down to building as his fathers built. The governing class, entrenched by the precedent and power of centuries and by the stamp it has put upon his mind, will never free him. It would be the suicide of the governing class, and the governing class knows it....

The menace to the Western world lies, not in the little brown man, but in the four hundred millions of yellow men should the little brown man undertake their management. The Chinese is not dead to new ideas; he is an efficient worker; makes a good soldier, and is wealthy in the essential materials of a machine age. Under a capable management he will go far. The Japanese is prepared and fit to undertake this management. Not only has he proved himself an apt imitator of Western material progress, a sturdy worker, and a capable organizer, but he is far more fit to manage the Chinese than we are. The baffling enigma of the Chinese character is no baffling enigma to him. He understands as we could never school ourselves nor hope to understand. Their mental processes are largely the same. He thinks with the same thought-symbols as does the Chinese, and he thinks in the same peculiar grooves. He goes on where we are balked

by the obstacles of incomprehension. He takes the turning, which we cannot perceive, twists around the obstacle, and, presto! is out of sight in the ramifications of the Chinese mind where we cannot follow.

The Chinese has been called the type of permanence, and well he has merited it, dozing as he has through the ages. And as truly was the Japanese the type of permanence up to a generation ago, when he suddenly awoke and startled the world with a rejuvenescence the like of which the world had never seen before. The ideas of the West were the leaven which quickened the Japanese; and the ideas of the West transmitted by the Japanese mind into ideas Japanese, may well make the leaven powerful enough to quicken the Chinese.

We have had Africa for the Afrikaner, and at no distant day we shall hear "Asia for the Asiatic!" Four hundred million indefatigable workers (deft, intelligent, and unafraid to die), aroused and rejuvenescent, managed and guided by forty-five million additional human beings who are splendid fighting animals, scientific and modern, constitute that menace to the Western world, which has been well named the "Yellow Peril." The possibility of race adventure has not passed away. We are in the midst of our own. The Slav is just girding himself up to being. Why may not the yellow and the brown start out on an adventure as tremendous as our own and more strikingly unique?

The ultimate success of such an adventure the Western mind refuses to consider. It is not the nature of life to believe itself weak. There is such a thing as a race egotism as well as creature egotism, and a very good thing it is. In the first place, the Western world will not permit the rise of the yellow peril. It is firmly convinced that it will not permit the yellow and the brown to wax strong and menace its peace and comfort. It advances this idea with persistency, and delivers itself of long arguments showing how and why this menace will not be permitted to arise. Today, far more voices are engaged in denying the yellow peril than in prophesying it. The Western world is warned, if not armed, against the possibility of it.

In the second place, there is a weakness inherent in the brown man which will bring his adventure to naught. From the West he has borrowed all our material achievement and passed out ethical achievement by. Our engines of production and destruction he has made his. What was once solely ours he now duplicates, rivaling our merchants in the commerce of the East, thrashing the Russian on sea and land. A marvelous imitator truly, but imitating us only in things material. Things spiritual cannot be imitated; they must be felt and lived, woven into the very fabric of life, and here the Japanese fails.

It required no revolution of his nature to learn to calculate the range and fire a field-gun or to march the goose-step. It was mere matter of training. Our material achievement is the product of our intellect. It is knowledge, and knowledge, like coin, is interchangeable. It is not wrapped up in the heredity of the new-born child, but is something to be acquired afterward. Not so with our soul stuff, which is the product of an evolution, which goes back to the raw beginnings of the race....

Back of our own great race adventure, back of our robberies by sea and land, our lusts and violences and all of the evil things we have done, there is a certain integrity, a sternness of conscience, a melancholy responsibility of life, a sympathy and comradeship and warm human feel, which is ours, indubitably ours, and which we cannot teach to the Oriental as we would teach logarithms or the trajectory of projectiles. That we have groped for the way of right conduct and agonized over the soul betokens our spiritual endowment. Though we have strayed often and far from righteousness, the voices of the seers have always been raised, and we have harked back to the bidding of conscience. The colossal fact of our history is that we have made the religion of Jesus Christ our religion. No matter how dark in error and deed, ours has been a history of spiritual struggle and endeavor. We are preeminently a religious race, which is another way of saying that we are a right-seeking race....

Source: Jack London, "The Yellow Peril" (1904). Reprinted in Kurashige, Lon and Alice Yang Murray, eds. *Major Problems in Asian American History*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003. 181–184.

The full text of the essay is available online at <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/4953>.