

## Life and Times of W. E. B. Du Bois: His Visit to Japan in 1936

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In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868-1963), a staunch believer of Pan-Africanism, stated his famous prophecy: “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line.” W. E. B. Du Bois foresaw the racial issues would be more serious problems in the 20th century. Du Bois also noticed the necessity of cooperation and solidarity between people of Africa and African descent and Asians. He especially had positive images of Japan as a leader of “colored people” in Asia. Japan’s rapid modernization since the Meiji Restoration in 1868, and its victory for the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 highly attracted his attention to Japan, the colored nation another side of the Pacific.

This article, which is a part of the author’s research project “Life and Times of W. E. B. Du Bois,” mainly deals with his two-week visit to Japan in 1936. First, an overview of life and times of Du Bois is presented. He was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1868, three years after the abolition of slavery by the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. After graduating from high school, he attended Fisk University in Nashville in 1885, where he faced fierce racial discrimination in the South.

In 1888, Du Bois entered Harvard University. During his college years at Harvard, he received a scholarship for studies in Germany, and also traveled extensively in Europe, in which his worldview was broadly expanded. He completed his dissertation on the Atlantic Slave Trade and became the first African American student who received Ph. D. degree from Harvard University

in 1895. His dissertation was also published as the first volume of Harvard Historical Studies Series in 1896.

In 1897 Du Bois was appointed as a professor of history and economics at Atlanta University after teaching and research at Wilberforce University and University of Pennsylvania. He began to broaden his social activities on black liberation internationally, and he became a cofounder of the Niagara Movement in 1905. Then, he cofounded NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and edited the *Crisis*, an official publication of NAACP. In 1910 Du Bois organized Pan-African Congress in Paris.

In 1936 Du Bois made a “world tour” including Germany (under the Nazi regime), the Soviet Union, Manchukuo (a puppet state of Japanese colonialism), China and Japan. Du Bois arrived at Nagasaki, Japan in December 2<sup>nd</sup>. During his two-week stay in Japan, Du Bois was well treated by not a few government officials and intellectuals, and visited many places in Kansai and Kanto regions. He left Yokohama for Hawaii in December 17<sup>th</sup>.

In Japan, Du Bois had noticed that Japanese people, who arranged his schedule, mainly attempted to show him what they wanted to. Nevertheless, he still kept his pro-Japanese attitude during and after his visit to Japan. In his views, “race” came before “class” or “nation” and such views were, to some extent, by-product of Whites’ vicious racism against colored people. Du Bois expected Japan as a champion of colored nations against countries or colonies ruled by the Whites.

Through his life as a scholar as well as an activist, Du Bois continued his fight with racism and struggled to restore history of Africa and the African Diaspora until his death in Accra, Ghana in 1963. Considering unstable or segregated present political and economic condition in our global arena, I believe that W. E. B. Du Bois’s academic and activist works are still worthy to be scrutinized from contemporary and/or current perspectives.