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Racial Identities in China: Context and Meaning

Frank Dikötter

This yellow river, it so happens, bred a nation identified by its yellow skin pigment. Moreover, this nation also refers to its earliest ancestor as the Yellow Emperor. Today, on the face of the earth, of every five human beings there is one that is a descendant of the Yellow Emperor.¹

If, in contemporary Germany, a leading intellectual identified the people of that country according to physical features (“blond hair and blue eyes”) and represented them as a homogeneous descent group (“the Aryans”), this would be seen as contributing to the narrative construction of a German racial identity. Unlike ethnic, regional or religious identities, racial narratives are specific in considering essential presumed biological features. Narratives of “race” attempt to root culture in nature, to equate social groups with biological units, to primordialize the imagined or real congenital endowments of people. In Su Xiaokang’s recent definition of China given above, human beings do not have a common descent: “of every five human beings there is one that is a descendant of the Yellow Emperor.” “Chineseness” is seen to be primarily a matter of biological descent, physical appearance and congenital inheritance. Cultural features, such as “Chinese civilization” or “Confucianism,” are thought to be the product of that imagined biological group: they are secondary and can be changed, reformed or even eradicated. Confucian scholar or socialist cadre, Hunanese peasant or Hong Kong entrepreneur, one will always be “Chinese” by virtue of one’s blood, according to Su Xiaokang.

Myths of origins, ideologies of blood, conceptions of racial hierarchy and narratives of biological descent have indeed formed a central part in the cultural construction of identity in China. The discursive invention of racial identities has become particularly important since the rise of nationalist movements in the late 19th century, but primordial senses of belonging based on blood remain as salient in contemporary China as they are in Europe and in the United States. In an era of economic globalization and political depolarization, racial identities and racial discrimination have in fact increased in East Asia, affecting both human rights of minority groups and collective perceptions of the world order. Although a considerable body of scholarly work has highlighted the historical and contemporary dimensions of racial identities in the West, virtually nothing is known about the articulation and deployment of racial frames of reference in China.

1. Su Xiaokang, “Introduction,” “River Elegy,” *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Winter 1991–92), p. 9.

In their opposition to the systematic investigation of racial discourses and practices in China, some sinologists have argued that “racism” cannot be found in “Chinese culture.”² Anthropologist Charles Stafford, for instance, maintains that “race” is not a “Chinese” concept, hence “racism” can only occur in “the West.”³ Let us take an example. Kang Youwei (1858–1927), one of the most acclaimed philosophers of the late 19th century, judged that Africans, “with their iron faces, silver teeth, slanting jaws like a pig, front view like an ox, full breasts and long hair, their hands and feet dark black, stupid like sheep or swine,” should be whitened by intermarriage, although he feared that no refined white girl would ever agree to mate with a “monstrously ugly black.” Whites and yellows who married blacks as a contribution to the purification of mankind should therefore be awarded a medal with the inscription “Improver of the Race,” whereas “browns or blacks whose characteristics are too bad, whose physical appearance is too ugly or who carry a disease should be given a sterilizing medication to stop the perpetuation of their race.”⁴ Kang Youwei used the terms *renzhong* (human breed, human race) and *zhongzu* (breed, race), in his description of Africans, but according to Charles Stafford, “to translate these [terms] as race is to impose a Western reading on what are supposed to be Chinese cultural constructs.”⁵ Through the magic of linguistic reductionism, the virulent racial discourse of a prominent reformer has been transformed into an inconsequential utterance which does not “belong” to “Chinese culture.” Racism, like human rights, it is argued, is a Western concept with no equivalent in China. Delegates of the Chinese Communist Party at recent meetings of the United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in Geneva uphold precisely the same argument, a rhetorical strategy used to delay the introduction of clear definitions of racial discrimination and racial prejudice into the country’s legal system.

Racial discourses and practices, however, cannot be reduced to the mere appearance of the word “race.” Words do not exist independently from a context: they are endowed with meaning, and these meanings are culturally and historically contingent. In English, for instance, the word “race” has had a number of very different meanings and connotations since the Middle Ages; only during the 19th century did this term start to refer to alleged biological differences between groups of people.⁶ Nor is it a necessary precondition to use the word “race” in order to construct racial categories of thought. At the turn of the century, many authors in Britain used the word “nation” to sustain racial frames of analysis; the “nation” was thought to correspond to a biologically homogeneous unit

2. For instance David Y. F. Ho, “Prejudice, colonialism, and interethnic relations: An East–West dialogue,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, No. 20 (1985), pp. 224–25.

3. Charles Stafford, “The discourse of race in modern China,” *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (September 1993), p. 609.

4. Kang Youwei, *Datongshu (One World)* (Beijing: Guji chubanshe, 1956), pp. 118–122.

5. Stafford, “The discourse of race in modern China,” p. 609.

6. Michael Banton, *Racial Theories* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

which could be improved through selective breeding. In Nazi Germany, German citizens were often described as a “Volk,” whereas “racial hygiene” was called “Volksgesundheit.” No historian would deny that the term “Volk” has a variety of ambiguous meanings, but it would take a bigot to argue that these terms did not contribute to the invention of “the Aryans” as a biologically integrated group of people. Nor would any historian argue that Nazi Germany was not racist because the word “race” was originally English.

Similarly, many terms were used in China from the late 19th century onwards to represent that country as a biologically specific entity: *zu* (lineage, clan), *zhong* (seed, breed, type, race), *zulei* (type of lineage), *minzu* (nationality, race), *zhongzu* (breed, race) and *renzhong* (human breed, human race) all acquire different meanings in different contexts. The question a historian should ask is what type of identity these different terms contribute to construct in specific circumstances. *Minzu*, often simply translated as “nationality,” means different things for different authors in China throughout the 20th century. Between 1902 and 1911, it was used to promote symbolic boundaries of blood and descent: “nationalities” as political units were equated with “races” as biological units. In nationalist narratives of the first decade of this century, *minzu* was thought to be based on a quantifiable number of people called “Chinese,” a group with clear boundaries by virtue of imagined blood ties, kinship and descent. As Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), the principal proponent of a Chinese *minzu*, put it in his famous *Three Principles of the People*: “The greatest force is common blood. The Chinese belong to the yellow race because they come from the blood stock of the yellow race. The blood of ancestors is transmitted by heredity down through the race, making blood kinship a powerful force.”⁷ The historian of racial identities, clearly, is not interested in a philological examination of a few terms for their own sake, but in the analysis of different texts in which authors attempt to naturalize cultural differences between groups of people.

While the reality of racial discourses and practices in China is sometimes recognized, it is often argued that the social scientist needs “a” definition of racism, as if there were only one model of racism which is universal in its origins, causes, meanings and effects. By imposing “a” definition of an ideal type of “racism,” racial discourses which do not conform to the imposed model are ignored, marginalized or trivialized. If racism is defined in terms of features which are specific to a European context (“white racism”), for instance, the specific articulations which have emerged in Brazil, Japan or China are seen as “special cases” which threaten to deconstruct the ideal type.⁸ Far from being fixed or static entities, the polyphony and adaptability of racial narratives in different historical circumstances should be recognized if their enduring appeal is to be understood. There is, nevertheless, a common thread to different

7. Sun Wen (Sun Yat-sen), *Sanminzhuyi (The Three People's Principles)* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1927), pp. 4–5.

8. For a more detailed discussion of essentialism in explanations of racism, see Philip Cohen's excellent article, “‘It's racism what dunnit': Hidden narratives in theories of racism”

forms of racism in that they all primarily group human populations on the basis of some biological signifier, be it skin colour, body height, hair texture or head-shape. In different cultural and historical contexts, racial discourses combine in varying degrees with ethnocentrism, where groups of people are defined primarily in cultural terms, and furthermore intersect with discourses of gender, sexuality, social status, region and age to produce different meanings and connotations.⁹

In China, racial categories of analysis started to supersede ethnocentric senses of identity during the last decade of the 19th century. Reformers like Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei ordered mankind into a racial hierarchy of biological groups where “yellows” competed with “whites” over degenerate breeds of “browns,” “blacks” and “reds.” The writer Tang Caichang (1867–1900) couched it in evenly balanced clauses: “Yellow and white are wise, red and black are stupid; yellow and white are rulers, red and black are slaves; yellow and white are united, red and black are scattered.”¹⁰ “Race” gradually emerged as the most common symbol of national cohesion, permanently replacing more conventional emblems of cultural identity. The myth of blood was further sealed by the turn of the century when the revolutionaries created a national symbol out of the Yellow Emperor. Liu Shiwei (1884–1919), to take but one example, advocated the introduction of a calendar in which the foundation year corresponded to the birth of the Yellow Emperor. “They [the reformers] see the preservation of religion as a handle, so they use the birth of Confucius as the starting date of the calendar; the purpose of our generation is the preservation of the race, so we use the birth of the Yellow Emperor as a founding date.”¹¹ Revolutionaries like Chen Tianhua (1875–1905) infused kin terms into racial frames of reference to foster the much needed bonds of national loyalty: “The racial feeling comes from birth onwards. For the members of one’s own race, there is surely mutual intimacy and love; for the members of a foreign race, there is surely mutual savagery and killing.”¹²

If “race” had become the main definer of the nation, racial categories of analysis were further consolidated by dubious studies in anthropometry, craniology and raciology after the fall of the Qing empire (1911). Chen Yucang (1889–1947), director of the Medical College of Tongji

footnote continued

in James Donald and Ali Rattansi (eds.), “Race,” *Culture and Difference* (London: Sage, 1992), pp. 83–84.

9. On the interplay between discourses of gender, sexuality and race, see Frank Dikötter, *Sex, Culture and Modernity in China: Medical Science and the Construction of Sexual Identities in the Early Republic Period* (London: Hurst; and Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 1994 (in press)).

10. Tang Caichang, *Juedianmingzhai neiyuan* (*Essays on Political and Historical Matters*) (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1968), p. 468.

11. Liu Shiwei, “Huangdi jinian shuo” (“About a calendar based on the Yellow Emperor”), *Huangdi hun* (*The Soul of the Yellow Emperor*), 1904 (Taipei: Zhonghua minguo shiliao congbian, 1968 reprint), p. 1.

12. Chen Tianhua, *Chen Tianhua ji* (*Collected Works of Chen Tianhua*) (Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1982), p. 81.

University and a secretary to the Legislative Yuan, boldly postulated that the degree of civilization was the only indicator of cranial weight: "If we compare the cranial weights of different people, the civilized are somewhat heavier than the savages, and the Chinese brain is a bit heavier than the European brain."¹³ Liang Boqiang, in an often quoted study on the "Chinese race" published in 1926, took the blood's "index of agglutination" as an indicator of purity,¹⁴ while the absence of body hair came to symbolize a biological boundary of the "Chinese race" for a popular writer like Lin Yutang (1895–1976), who even proclaimed that "on good authority from medical doctors, and from references in writing, one knows that a perfectly bare mons veneris is not uncommon in Chinese women."¹⁵ If "Chineseness" was thought to be rooted in every part of the body, cultural differences between groups of people were also claimed to be solidly grounded in nature, in particular in the case of Africans. The *Great Dictionary of Zoology* (1923), the first reference work of its kind, contended that the "black race" had "a rather long head, many protruding teeth, and a quite low forehead, so that their face is inclined towards the back. This type of people have a shameful and inferior way of thinking, and have no capacity to shine in history."¹⁶ Racialized senses of identity also filtered down to lower levels of education after the foundation of the Republic in 1911. The opening sentence of a chapter on "human races" in a 1920 textbook for middle schools declared that "among the world's races, there are strong and weak constitutions, there are black and white skins, there is hard and soft hair, there are superior and inferior cultures. A rapid overview shows that they are not of the same level."¹⁷ Even in primary schools, readings on racial politics became part of the curriculum: "Mankind is divided into five races. The yellow and white races are relatively strong and intelligent. Because the other races are feeble and stupid, they are being exterminated by the white race. Only the yellow race competes with the white race. This is so-called evolution Among the contemporary races that could be called superior, there are only the yellow and the white races. China is the yellow race."¹⁸ Although it is clear that individual writers, political groups and academic institutions had different ideas about the meanings of physical features, many people in China had come to identify themselves and others in terms of "race" by the end of the Republican period.¹⁹

13. Chen Yucang, *Renti de yanjiu (Research on the Human Body)* (Shanghai: Zhengzhong shuju, 1937), p. 180.

14. Liang Boqiang, "Yixueshang Zhongguo minzu zhi yanjiu" ("Medical research on the Chinese race"), *Dongfang zazhi (Eastern Miscellanea)*, No. 13 (July 1926), pp. 87–100.

15. Lin Yutang, *My Country and My People* (New York: John Ray, 1935), p. 26.

16. Du Yaquan et al. (eds.), *Dongwuxue da cidian (Great Dictionary of Zoology)* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1927 (1st ed. 1923)), p. 15.

17. Fu Yunsen, *Renwen dili (Human Geography)* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1914), pp. 9–15.

18. L. Wieger, *Moralisme officiel des écoles, en 1920* (Hien-hien, 1921, p. 180, original Chinese text).

19. For a detailed discussion, see Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (London: C. Hurst; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1992).

Confronted with extensive factual evidence about the importance of racial discourses in 20th-century China, some historians have reacted by dismissing it as “Westernization.” Racism in China, as one observer has subtly suggested, was the consequence of the “hegemonic power” of “Euro-American imperialism.”²⁰ Racial identities outside the West are reduced to a “counter-discourse,” a “reversed racism,” a “derivation” of a more “authentic” form of “white racism.”²¹ This line of argument presents a number of difficulties. First, as already argued above, it perpetuates a unitary conception of racism, as if a variety of racial narratives could be reduced to one model which is universal in its origins (the West), its causes (capitalist society) and its effects (colonialization). Secondly, it disregards the historical specificities of racial identities and reduces a variety of cultural groups into a West and a Rest, into colonizers and colonized, into “white racists” and “coloured victims.” Thirdly, it represents people in China as passive subjects devoid of free thought, critical analysis and intellectual autonomy; they are thought to have merely “internalized” a form of identity which has been imposed by imperialism. The history of China, however, cannot be reduced to a response to another ahistorical entity called the West. The “Western impact–Chinese response” approach not only introduces eurocentric distortions, as Paul Cohen forcefully argued, it also fails to take into account historical transformations which occurred in parts of China before its prolonged exposure to foreign ideas.²²

The importance of skin colour in China in the construction of symbolic boundaries between racially constituted groups of people is a good example. Some social scientists claim that Chinese reformers were forced to accept and internalize the racial label “yellow” during the late 19th century. In Europe, however, the notion of a yellow race probably only originated at the end of the 17th century as a reaction to reports of the Jesuits in China on the symbolic value of the colour yellow. The concept did not exist in the ancient world, and was not used by travellers of the Middle Ages such as Marco Polo, Pian del Carpini, Bento de Goes, or any of the Arab traders. In 1655, the first European mission to the Qing described the Chinese as having a white complexion “equal to the Europeans,” except for some Southerners whose skin was “slightly brown.”²³ When a young inhabitant of the Celestial Kingdom was presented at the court of Louis XIV in 1684, he was described as a “young Indian.”²⁴ The first scientific work in which the notion of a “yellow race”

20. Arif Dirlik, “The discourse of race in modern China: review article,” *China Information*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Spring 1993), pp. 68–71.

21. For instance Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: ZED, 1986) and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 152–53.

22. Paul Cohen, *Discovering History in China: American Historical Writing on the Recent Chinese Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984).

23. Jan Nieuwhof, *Het gezantschap der Neerlandtsche Oost-Indische Compagnie aan den Groeten Tartarischen Cham den tegenwoordigen Keizer van China* (Amsterdam: Jacob van Meurs, 1665), p. 173.

24. Pierre Huard, “Depuis quand avons-nous la notion d’une race jaune?” *Institut Indochinois pour l’Etude de l’Homme*, No. 4 (1942), pp. 40–41.

appeared was François Bernier's "Etrennes adressées à Madame de la Sablière pour l'année 1688." In China, however, the meanings ascribed to the term "yellow" were very different. Yellow, one of the five "pure" colours in China, had long symbolized fame and progress. It was the colour of the Emperor of the Middle Kingdom, ancestral home of the "descendants of the Yellow Emperor" who were thought to have originated in the valley of the Yellow River. Wang Fuzhi (1619–92), a 17th-century nationalist who remained influential until the beginning of this century, entitled one of his more important works the *Yellow Book* (*Huangshu*) (1656); the last chapter contrasted the imperial colour yellow to "mixed" colours and named China the "yellow centre."²⁵ On more popular discursive registers, legends circulated about the origins of mankind in which noble people were made of yellow mud and ignoble people of vulgar rope.²⁶ Huang Zunxian (1848–1905), when aged 20, recorded in his diary that "all men are fashioned out of yellow mud." At 54, as one of the most outstanding reformers of the late imperial period and an important proponent of racial theories, he publicly wondered, "Why is the yellow race not the only race in the world?"²⁷ Far from being a negative label imposed on Chinese scholars by the "cultural hegemony" of "imperialism," the notion of a yellow race was a positive symbol of imperial nobility actively mobilized by reformers who transformed it into a powerful and effective means of identification. The only sector of the social field which denounced the reformers' use of terms like yellow race (*huangzhong*) and white race (*baizhong*) were conservative scholars, mainly because it undermined imperial cosmologies on which their power and knowledge was predicated.²⁸

Chinese reformers in the 1890s were active agents who participated in the invention of their identities. They were not the passive recipients of a "cultural hegemony," but creative individuals who selectively appropriated elements of foreign thought systems in a process of cultural interaction. More importantly, the reform movement which contributed so much to the invention of racial identities in China was to a large extent the product of complex interactions and fusions of different indigenous schools of thought, such as New Text Confucianism, statecraft scholarship (*jingshi*), classical non-canonical philosophies (*zhuzixue*) and Mahayana Buddhism, all of which had virtually nothing to do with Western learning.²⁹ Racial identities during the late imperial period, in

25. E. Vierheller, *Nation und Elite im Denken von Wang Fu-chih (1619–1692)* (Hamburg: Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens, 1968), pp. 30, 124.

26. *Tai ping yulan* (*Song Encyclopaedia*), quoting the Later Han work "Fengsutong" (Taipei: Xinxing shuju, 1959), p. 1693 (360:5a). See also Zhou Jianren, "Renzhong qi yuan shuo" ("Legends about the origins of human races"), *Dongfang zazhi*, Vol. 16, No. 11 (June 1919), pp. 93–100.

27. Noriko Kamachi, *Reform in China: Huang Tsun-hsien and the Japanese Model* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp. 15, 141.

28. Charles M. Lewis, *Prologue to the Chinese Revolution: The Transformation of Ideas and Institutions in Hunan Province, 1891–1907* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University East Asian Research Center, 1976), pp. 64–65.

29. Chang Hao, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis: Search for Order and Meaning 1890–1911* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

other words, were neither generated by a self-contained system called “Chinese culture,” nor imposed through “Western hegemony.” They were created through cultural interaction with a variety of schools of thought by a group of reformers who actively responded to the decline of imperial cosmology. The meanings of racial identities have been constantly recreated by different groups of people in China throughout the 20th century, leading to a variability of racial narratives which cannot be reduced to a single model called “Chinese racism.”

University students have been the most prominent social group involved in one of the more recent attempts to promote skin colour as a marker of social status in China. Physical attacks and demonstrations against African students on the university campuses of the People’s Republic of China throughout the 1980s have been the most widely publicized feature of these racialized practices, which are analysed in compelling detail by Barry Sautman and Michael Sullivan in the two following articles. Far from being a manifestation of a vestigial form of xenophobia, these events are an intrinsic part of racialized trends of thought which have been diversely deployed in China since the end of the 19th century. Articulated in a distinct cultural site (university campuses) by a specific social group (university students) in the political context of the reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping since 1978, campus racism demonstrates how contradictory discourses of “race” and “human rights” can be harnessed together in politicized oppositions to the state. Both articles also point to the question of sexuality in the racialized encounters between African and Chinese students, while the complex intertwinings between social status and race is highlighted.

Although antagonistic relationships between Chinese and African students may soon give way to a greater degree of social intercourse in an increasingly commercialized society, the attempt to mark, naturalize and rank differences between groups of people remains widespread. However, there is no clear sign that the hierarchies of power maintained through racial discourses are being questioned by the cultural centres of authority in China, unlike other governments. Critical intellectuals in Hong Kong and Taiwan have also failed to address the issue. Bo Yang’s indignant exclamation that “Chinese racism is far more serious than American racism” remains no more than a gratuitous statement which is never followed by any effort at critical inquiry.³⁰ The racialization of collective senses of identity has actually increased within both state circles and relatively independent intellectual spheres, particularly since the erosion of Communist authority after the Tiananmen massacre. The official promotion of China as the “homeland of the Modern Yellow Race,” for instance in a *Handbook on Education in Chineseness* (1990) edited by Wu Jie, does not only have far-reaching consequences for minority groups inside the political boundaries of the PRC. Outer Mongolia, to take an example, has recently been portrayed as an “organic and integral

30. Bo Yang, “Zhongzu qishi” (“Racial discrimination”), *Choulou de Zhongguoren* (*The Ugly Chinese*) (Taipei: Linbai chubanshe, 1985), pp. 212–14.

part” of the “Chinese race” by a propaganda book aimed at Japan, called *The Inside Story of Outer Mongolia's Independence*.³¹ The state's interest in genetics is also reflected in recent eugenic legislation. Policies for the “improvement of the race” were implemented in Gansu province in 1988,³² largely based on scientifically discredited theories which became widespread in the Republican period³³ and actively promoted by a small group of high CPC functionaries centred around Li Peng. A bill on eugenics to prevent inferior births was recently presented to the NPC Standing Committee.³⁴ Racial nationalism arising in a potentially unstable empire with an embattled Communist Party could have grave consequences for regional stability in that vital part of the world. Moreover, the multiplication of regional identities and the emergence of cultural diversity could, as in the first decades of this century, prompt a number of political figures to appeal to racialized senses of belonging in order to supersede internal divisions.

Racial identities and their effect upon human rights in East Asia are a serious and potentially explosive issue of the last decade of the 20th century which needs to be fully addressed. However, as the result of an excessively narrow frame of explication which has reduced the formation of racial identities in the modern world to a uniquely “Western” phenomenon, the current state of the field and the available expertise on these issues is dangerously underdeveloped. Efforts to reduce or eliminate all forms of racism on an international scale will not succeed without the active support of a part of the world which accounts for a quarter of mankind. In an era of economic globalization and political depolarization, marked by the rise in power of China and the Four Little Dragons (Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore), the systematic investigation of racism and discriminatory exclusions in these countries has become a matter of great urgency.

31. W. J. F. Jenner, “Past and present political futures for China,” paper presented to the 19th National Conference of the Australian Institute of International Affairs, Sydney, 9 October 1993, p. 13.

32. “Gansu tongguo difang fagui jinzhi chidai sharen shengyu” (“Gansu province promulgates a law prohibiting mentally retarded people to bear children”), *Renmin ribao*, 25 November 1988.

33. Frank Dikötter, “Eugenics in Republican China,” *Republican China*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (November 1989), pp. 1–17.

34. *Survey of World Broadcasts*, 22 December 1993, pp. G/2–3.