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THE HISTORY OF RACIAL THEORIES IN CHINA

Frank Dikötter

Human beings display endless ingenuity in devising ways of discriminating and abusing each other, whether this is done in the name of religion, culture, gender, class, or nation. Until recently, the notion of 'race' was one of the most effective barriers against equality, as human beings were classified into discrete clusters claimed to correspond to biological units, distributed hierarchically on a scale of evolution with winners at the top and losers at the bottom. Eye color, skin tone, cranial shape, or hair texture were seen as markers of profound biological differences between humans, justifying such diverse institutions as the transatlantic slave trade, apartheid, and the Holocaust.¹

The idea that people could be classified on the basis of some real or imagined physical signifier took on global dimensions in the nineteenth century. The reason for this explosion of interest in racial theories seems simple enough: they were exported alongside guns and germs by Europeans as they conquered the rest of the world. But Europeans had also used religion to convert, exploit, or exterminate the heathens around them, although Christianity failed to reap much of a harvest, notably among Hindus and Muslims. Unlike religion, 'race' presented something new. It was part of a modern way of thinking and understanding the world. The term given to this new worldview was 'science,' and it invoked reason rather than faith. Science underpinned the astonishing innovations in transportation, communication, and manufacturing that were made in the nineteenth century. If science could produce machine guns and predict the movement of celestial objects, surely it was just as credible when it divided human beings into distinct biological groups?

Racial theories offered another advantage. Not only did they harness the authority of science, invoking seemingly objective facts grounded in nature, but they were also very versatile. Like the ever-evolving idiom of science, the language of race was rich, flexible, complex, and always changing. And like the guns used by colonisers, they could be turned against their carriers and made to serve very different purposes.

Racial theories first made an appearance in China at the end of the nineteenth century. The reason they were taken up was due, in part, to pre-existing cultural and social traditions. While there was no such thing as a notion of 'race' in ancient or imperial China, the very term for the color 'yellow' had many positive connotations. In Europe the idea of a 'yellow race' probably only appeared at the end of the seventeenth century as a reaction to Jesuit reports from China on the symbolic value of the color yellow.

The concept did not exist in the ancient world, and was not used by travelers 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 local people as having a white complexion, 'equal to the Europeans,' except for some in the south who were 'slightly brown.' The first scientific work in which the notion of a 'yellow race' appeared was François Bernier's 'Etrennes adressées à Madame de la Sablière pour l'année 1688.'²

Yellow, on the other hand, was one of the five 'pure' colors in imperial China and symbolized the Center. It was the color 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. After the country was invaded by the Manchus, a frontier people who established the Qing in 1644, some scholars who remained loyal to the Ming gave a new twist to the symbolic significance of the color 'yellow.' One of the most virulent critics of Manchu rule was Wang Fuzhi (1619–1692). Like many other scholars who refused to serve the new dynasty, he viewed the invaders as morally inferior barbarians. Wang titled one of his more important works, published in 1656, the *Yellow Book*: the last chapter contrasted the imperial color yellow to 'mixed' colors and named the empire as the 'yellow center.'³

Equally important was a long-standing tradition of favoring fair skin, referred to as 'white' from ancient times. A light complexion was highly valued, and poetry often compared the fairness of female paragons to white jade. Men were no exception, and at court some nobles even used powder to whiten their faces. In contrast, the darkness of peasants who tilled the fields under the burning sun was viewed with disdain. The polarity between fair and dark, based on a feudal hierarchy which distinguished landlords from peasants, was projected onto outsiders as the empire discovered other parts of the world. By the Ming dynasty, a profuse vocabulary focused on the darker skin tones of people in South-east Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Europeans, on the other hand, were described as hairy creatures who were 'ash white' or reddish. As one nineteenth-century poem on the British and Indian troops fighting the first Opium War put it: 'The white ones are cold and dull as the ashes of frogs, the black ones are ugly and dirty as coal.'⁴

While the symbolic importance given to the color yellow and a negative view of dark skin may have been prevalent, the notion of 'race' did not appear until the end of the nineteenth century. A key moment was the country's devastating defeat in 1894–1895 against Japan, a country usually described as a mere vassal. The enemy's triumph was unexpected, even by those who had been aware of the empire's shortcomings, and led a number of scholar officials to question traditional modes of governance. For the first time, leading reformers like Yan Fu, Liang Qichao, and Kang Youwei turned away from Confucianism to seek enlightenment abroad, hoping to find the keys to wealth and power on the distant shores of Europe instead. They searched the writings of such foreign luminaries as Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer for a unifying concept that could bind all the emperor's subjects together, hoping to forge a modern, powerful nation capable of resisting foreign encroachments. They discovered the notion of 'race' and used new evolutionary theories from England to present the world as a battlefield in which different breeds struggled for survival, as 'yellows' competed with 'whites' over inferior 'browns,' 'blacks,' and 'reds.' Their message of racial unity in a universe red in

tooth and claw was enormously popular, mainly because it resonated so much with more traditional ideas about the lineage (*zu*).

The lineage was a social organization claiming common descent which came into being in its modern form under the Song (960–1279). A patrilineage was transmitted through the production of sons, and was generally confined to a cluster of villages where it owned land, schools, and an ancestral hall. Some of them dominated entire regions. Descent lines were recorded in genealogies (*zupu*), a task that might require the labour of many lineage members. The last edition of the genealogy of the Zeng in Hunan, which traced its descent from a prince of the Xia dynasty whose father had reigned from 2218 to 2168 BCE, involved 106 participants. Attempts to establish a blood link with a mythical ancestor were based on the need for social prestige. Genealogies also proved that the lineage was pure and that there had not been intermarriage with any of the peoples that had invaded and ruled the empire.⁵

Considerable friction could arise between lineages, and feuds prevailed throughout the Qing, although they were more common in the southeast, where the institution had grown more powerful than in the north. Armed battles could involve many thousands of combatants: a major conflict between the Hakka and Punti in 1856–1867 took a toll of 100,000 victims.⁶

The reformers portrayed ‘race’ as the extension of a massive, ancient lineage, tracing the origins of every inhabitant back to the Yellow Emperor, a mythical figure thought to have reigned from 2697 to 2597 BCE. In order to bolster their message of change in the face of imperialist aggression, the reformers invoked the threat of racial extinction (*miezhong*), basing their vision of doom on more popular anxieties about the disappearance of the lineage (*miezu*): ‘They will enslave us and hinder the development of our spirit and body . . . The brown and black races constantly waver between life and death, why not the 400 million of yellows?’⁷

Hierarchy underpinned the reformers’ view of a world divided into ‘races,’ as superior ‘white’ and ‘yellow races’ were opposed to the ‘darker races,’ doomed to extinction through evolutionary inadequacy. Their racial theories resonated with social distinctions specific to the empire, where ‘common people’ (*liangmin*) were legally separated from ‘mean people’ (*jianmin*) until the early eighteenth century. Tang Caichang (1867–1900) phrased it in evenly balanced clauses reminiscent of his classical education: ‘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.’⁸ Others wrote about ‘noble races’ (*guizhong*) and ‘low races’ (*jianzhong*), ‘superior races’ (*youzhong*) and ‘inferior races’ (*liezhong*), ‘historical races’ and ‘ahistorical races’ (*youlishi de zhongzu*).

The reformers used evolutionary theories very selectively, claiming that racial survival (*baozhong*) in a context of international competition was the inescapable consequence of profound evolutionary forces. Instead of appealing to Charles Darwin’s emphasis on competition between individuals of the same species, they were inspired by Herbert Spencer’s focus on group selection. For reformers like Yan Fu, Liang Qichao, and Kang Youwei, evolutionary forces were underpinned by the principle of racial grouping, as individuals of a race should unite in order to survive in the struggle for existence much as each cell contributed to the overall health of a living organism. They also ignored the neo-Darwinian explanation of evolution as a branching process, adopting instead a Neo-Lamarckian theory of unilinear evolution which viewed human development as a single line of ascent from the apes: the embryo developed in a purposeful way towards

maturity in a process that could be guided by human intervention into the social and political environment. Neo-Lamarckism offered a flexible vision of evolution which closely suited the political agenda of the reformers, as human progress in the realm of politics was seen to be conducive to the racial improvement of the species.

The reformers were no revolutionaries, and they proposed a form of constitutional monarchy that included the Manchu emperor. Their understanding of the 'yellow race' (*huangzhong*) was broad enough to include all the people living within the imperial realm. But their political ascendancy came to an abrupt end in 1898, as the empress dowager rescinded all their decrees and executed several court officials sympathetic to their message of political reform.

Soon a number of more radical intellectuals started advocating the overthrow of the Qing dynasty. Not without resonance to the 1789 and 1848 political revolutions in Europe, the revolutionaries represented the ruling Manchus as an inferior 'race' which was responsible for the disastrous policies which had led to the decline of the country. In contrast, they viewed the majority of people in China as a homogeneous 'Han race.' Whereas the reformers had envisaged 'race' (*zhongzu*) as an extension of the lineage (*zu*), encompassing all people dwelling on the soil of the Yellow Emperor, the revolutionaries excluded the Mongols, Manchus, Tibetans, and other peoples from their definition, which was narrowed down to the Han, an ancient term that referred to a dynasty but was now given a new twist. To describe the Han, they used the term of *minzu*, combining the idea of a people (*min*) with the fiction of patrilineal descent (*zu*). The term first appeared in 1903 in an attempt to find a political rationale for the modern nation-state. *Minzu*, often translated as 'nation' or even 'nationality,' designated a lineage that shared a territory and an ancestor: it was both a racial and a corporate unit and is more accurately translated as *Volk*. This vision of blood and soil was eloquently illustrated by Zou Rong, one of the more influential revolutionaries. He proudly proclaimed that:

When men love their race, solidarity will arise internally, and what is outside will be repelled. Hence, to begin with, lineages were united and other lineages repelled; next, lineages of villages were united and lineages of other villages repelled; next, tribes were united and other tribes were repelled; finally, the people of a country became united, and people of other countries were repelled. This is the general principle of the races of the world, and also a major reason why races engender history. I will demonstrate to my countrymen, to allow them to form their own impression, how our yellow race, the yellow race of which the Han race is part, is able to unite itself and repel intruders.⁹

The Manchus were overthrown in a revolution in 1911, as a millenarian empire gave way to a modern republic. Racial theories proliferated in the following decades, as nationalists portrayed the Chinese as a people with shared physical attributes and a line of blood which could be traced back to the most ancient period. As Sun Yatsen, the founder of the Nationalist Party, 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.¹⁰

With the rise of a modern print culture, driven by many private publishing houses and by the general growth in literacy after the fall of the empire, similar ideas appeared in travel literature, scientific publications, and even school textbooks. 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.¹¹

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.¹²

There were endless studies disseminating racial theories in the name of science. Chen Yucang (1889–1947), director of the Medical College of Tongji 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 civilised are somewhat heavier than the savages, and the Chinese brain is a bit heavier than the European brain.’¹³ Liang Boqiang, in an oft-quoted study on the ‘Chinese race’ published in 1926, took the blood’s ‘index of agglutination’ as an indicator of purity, 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.’¹⁴

Tens of thousands of students used the openness of the republican era to pursue a higher education abroad. By 1930, Chinese students outnumbered any other foreign nationality at American universities, as knowledge in all areas was hotly pursued. Many became experts in their own fields, which ran the full gamut from avionics to zoology. Some of them wrote entire volumes on racial matters, in particular those working in medicine, genetics, geography, anthropology, and criminology. Li Chi published *The Formation of the Chinese People: An Anthropological Inquiry* in English with Harvard University Press in 1928, having gathered thousands of measurements of skulls and noses to determine that a group of Tungus were responsible for diluting the divine race of the Yellow Emperor through intermarriage. Zhang Junjun, who studied psychology at Columbia University but read voraciously on anthropology and eugenics in his spare time, authored two books suggesting that the ancestors of the Han race had type O blood flowing through their veins, a purity subsequently vitiated by racial admixture with barbarian tribes.¹⁵

Quite a few of these scholars, like many biologists everywhere at the time, interpreted lack of national strength as a sign of racial decline. They latched on to the burgeoning field of eugenics, which was widely popular in the academic community

in Europe and the United States, hoping to improve their country's heredity through the strict control of human reproduction. One such was Pan Guangdan (1898–1967), a graduate in zoology from Dartmouth College who went on to read for a higher degree at Columbia University in 1922 and founded the Chinese Eugenics Institute together with the Chinese Committee for Racial Hygiene. Through his numerous publications, which often combined modern science with a more traditional focus on the genealogies of patrilineal families, he turned eugenics into a household word in China.¹⁶

Pan Guangdan, like other scholars at the time, was deeply conversant with the international eugenics movement, but he did not simply replicate what he had learned in the United States. Thus in August 1930 he reviewed *The American Negro*, a book edited by Donald Young, noting how some of the contributors to the volume were idealists who were unwilling to speak in terms of racial inequality. This was particularly true of 'many scholars of Jewish origin,' Pan noted, posing as an outside observer who benefited from a more objective perspective:

But to be true to observable facts, in any given period of time sufficiently long for selection to take effect, races as *groups are* different, unequal, and there is no reason except one based upon sentiment why we cannot refer to them in terms of inferiority and superiority, when facts warrant us. It is to be suspected that the Jewish scholars, themselves belonging to a racial group which has long been unjustly discriminated against, have unwittingly developed among themselves a defensive mechanism which is influencing their judgments on racial questions. The reviewer recalls with regret that during his student days [in the United States] he had estranged some of his best Jewish friends for his candid views on the point of racial inequality.¹⁷

By the 1930s many educated people had come to identify themselves and others in terms of 'race,' even if they varied enormously in the meanings they attributed to real or imagined physical markers of difference. In fact, only a few isolated voices in republican China openly refuted the existence of a racial taxonomy in the human species. Zhang Junmai, for instance, wisely excluded 'common blood' from his definition of the nation. Qi Sihe, a noted historian, also criticized the use of racial categories of analysis by some of his colleagues and pointed out how 'race' was a declining notion in parts of Europe.¹⁸ But in general, racial ideas were so versatile that they cut across most political positions.

Racial theories became taboo following the communist takeover of China in 1949. Anthropology departments were suspended by the end of 1949, and social sciences like anthropology and sociology were condemned as 'bourgeois' a few years later in 1952. Pan Guangdan was singled out for severe criticism, while Mendelian laws of inheritance and T.H. Morgan's chromosome theory were rejected for ideological reasons. As in the Soviet Union, the idea that humans were determined by their genetic makeup was seen to be politically incorrect, and supporters of the Russian biologist Trofimo Lysenko argued instead that acquired characteristics could be inherited while environmental influences could be manipulated so as to alter an organism's features.

But 'race' was too resilient a notion simply to be abolished by decree. And while the Chinese Communist Party appealed to 'class' as a unifying concept, it did not abandon the politically vital distinction between a 'majority' on the one hand and a range of 'minorities' on the other. The communists perpetuated the idea that linguistically and

culturally diverse people in China actually belonged to a single, homogeneous group united by ties of blood called the ‘Han.’ As the political boundaries of the country claimed by the communists corresponded largely to those of the Qing empire, people in the strategically and economically vital border regions of Xinjiang and Tibet were portrayed as ‘minorities’ in their own homelands. The communists swiftly proceeded to classify 41 so-called minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu*), a number which increased to 56 by the time of the 1982 census.¹⁹

Although the idea of equality between different *minzu* was promoted by the regime in order to combat ‘Han chauvinism’ (*Da Han minzuzhuyi*), the representation of the Han as an absolute majority endowed with superior political and cultural attributes and hence destined to be the vanguard of the revolution and the forefront of economic development dominated official discourse during the Maoist period. In a manner recalling the racial taxonomies used by the revolutionaries at the beginning of the twentieth century, ‘minority nationalities’ were represented as less evolved branches of people who needed the moral and political guidance of the Han to ascend the scales of civilization. The idea of the Han as a politically more advanced and better endowed *minzu* pervaded the early decades of the communist regime, when assimilationist policies were eagerly pursued. Immediately after 1949, hundreds of thousands of demobilized soldiers, petty thieves, beggars, vagrants, and prostitutes were sent to help develop and colonise the Muslim belt which ran through Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, and Xinjiang. Colonists were also sent to Tibet and other border regions dominated by people who were once in the majority, but were now referred to as ‘minorities’.

The emphasis on class struggle and doctrinaire insistence on ideology at the expense of economics was reversed after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. After the ascent to power of Deng Xiaoping in 1979 and the gradual opening of the country, scientific research started to develop in a number of politically sensitive domains. One of the effects of the revival of physical anthropology and genetics was massive research on the ‘minority nationalities.’ Instead of portraying them as culturally or ‘racially’ distinct groups of people, a whole range of studies started claiming that they were organically linked to the majority of Han people. This was not an innovation, but harked back to the republican era, when the Nationalist Party, founded by Sun Yatsen, had already proposed a vision which emphasized both the organic unity of all the peoples living within the political boundaries of China and the inevitable fusion of non-Han groups into a broader Chinese nation dominated by the Han. Chiang Kaishek (1887–1975), the effective head of the country from 1927 to 1949 and leader of the Nationalist Party, clearly expressed this vision of the nation as a culturally diverse but racially unified entity in his important work titled *China’s Destiny*, written during the fight against Japan in the Second World War:

Our various clans actually belong to the same nation, as well as to the same racial stock. Therefore, there is an inner factor closely linking the historical destiny of common existence and common sorrow and joy of the whole Chinese nation. That there are five peoples designated in China is not due to differences in race or blood, but to religion and geographical environment. In short, the differentiation among China’s five peoples is due to regional and religious factors, and not to race or blood. This fact must be thoroughly understood by all our fellow countrymen.²⁰

Chiang Kaishek had referred to this line of descent as a 'Chinese nationality' (*Zhonghua minzu*). Although this approach remained marginal in the republican era, it became mainstream in the People's Republic after 1979. The notion of a 'Chinese nationality' became the basis for arguing that the political boundaries of the country were based on biological markers. Tibetans and Uighurs, for instance, were depicted as people who were merging biologically into a larger 'Chinese nationality' of which the Han formed the core.

Serological studies were carried out in the 1980s to highlight the biological proximity of all minority people to the Han.²¹ Mainly initiated by Professor Zhao Tongmao, estimations of genetic distance based on gene frequency claimed that the racial differences between population groups living within China—including Tibetans, Mongols and Uighurs—were comparatively small. Serologists also observed that the 'Negroid race' and the 'Caucasian race' were more closely related to each other than to the 'Mongoloid race.' Zhao Tongmao put the Han at the very center of his chart, which branched out gradually to include other minority groups from China in a tree highlighting the genetic distance between 'yellows' on the one hand and 'whites' and 'blacks' on the other. His conclusion underlined that the Han were the main branch of the 'yellow race' in China to which all the minority groups could be traced: the political boundaries of the People's Republic, in other words, appeared to be founded on clear biological markers of genetic distance.²²

In similar vein, skulls, hair, eyes, noses, ears, entire bodies, and even the penises of thousands of subjects were routinely measured, weighed, and assessed by anthropometrists in the 1980s and '90s in attempts to identify the 'special characteristics' (*tezheng*) of minority people. To take but one example, Zhang Zhenbiao, a senior anthropometrist writing in the prestigious *Acta Anthropologica Sinica*, reached the following conclusion after measuring 145 Tibetans:

As demonstrated by the results of an investigation into the special characteristics of the heads and faces of contemporary Tibetans, their heads and faces are fundamentally similar to those of various other nationalities of our country, in particular to those of our country's north and northwest (including the Han and national minorities). It is beyond doubt that the Tibetans and the other nationalities of our country descend from a common origin and belong, from the point of view of physical characteristics, to the same East-Asian type of yellow race (*huangzhongren de Dongya leixing*).²³

The political implications of such research for minorities was apparent in the government's promotion of China as the 'homeland of the modern yellow race,' of which even Outer Mongolia was described as an organic and integral part.²⁴

To this day, within both scientific institutions and government circles, different peoples in China are represented as one relatively homogeneous 'Chinese nationality' (*Zhonghua minzu*) of which all minorities are organic parts. As W.J.F. Jenner puts it rather appropriately, the idea of a 'Chinese nationality' means, in effect, that 'all the nationalities are, beneath their apparent diversity, one.'²⁵

Belief in the idea that humans have different origins was also revived in the 1980s, and served to reinforce this nationalist vision of racial unity. Prominent researchers represented Beijing Man at Zhoukoudian as the 'ancestor' of the 'Mongoloid race' (*Menggu*

renzhong). A great number of hominid teeth, skull fragments, and fossil apes, discovered at different sites scattered over China since 1949, were used to support the view that the ‘yellow race’ (*huangzhong*) was in a direct line of descent from its hominid ancestor in China. Although palaeoanthropologists in China acknowledged that the fossil evidence pointed to Africa as the birthplace of all humans, highly regarded researchers like Jia Lanpo repeatedly emphasized that humanity’s real place of origin should be located in East Asia. Wu Rukang, also one of the most eminent palaeoanthropologists in China, came very close to upholding a polygenist thesis in mapping different geographical spaces for the ‘yellow race’ (China), the ‘black race’ (Africa) and the ‘white race’ (Europe): ‘The fossils of homo sapiens discovered in China all prominently display the characteristics of the yellow race . . . pointing at the continuous nature between them, the yellow race and contemporary Chinese people.’²⁶

Early hominids present in China since the early Middle Pleistocene (one million years ago) were believed to be the origin to which all the population groups in the People’s Republic could be traced back. Physical anthropologists also invoked detailed craniological examinations to provide ‘irrefutable evidence’ about a continuity in development between early hominids and the ‘modern Mongoloid race.’²⁷ Scientific research on fossil bones was carried out to represent the nation’s racial past as characterized by the gradual emergence of a Han ‘majority’ into which different ‘minorities’ would have merged.²⁸ As one close observer has noted,

In the West, scientists treat the Chinese fossil evidence as part of the broad picture of human evolution worldwide; in China, it is part of national history—an ancient and fragmentary part, it is true, but none the less one that is called upon to promote a unifying concept of unique origin and continuity within the Chinese nation.²⁹

These theories have not changed substantially with new DNA evidence. Every new discovery in China, it seems, is jumped upon to question the ‘Out of Africa’ thesis. When an ancient skull was dug up in Henan in 2008, it was widely interpreted as evidence that most of the people living in China were descendants of a native lineage whose uninterrupted evolution could be traced back millions of years. As the *China Daily* put it, ‘The discovery at Xuchang supports the theory that modern Chinese man originated in what is present-day Chinese territory rather than Africa.’³⁰

These were not the isolated musings of a few eccentric intellectuals. The *Acta Anthropologica Sinica*, China’s flagship journal in human anthropology quoted above, was systematically investigated by a team of researchers. They discovered that between 1982 and 2001, all of the 779 articles directly related to the study of human variation used the notion of ‘race’ and none of them questioned its value. The authors of the survey contrasted their findings to those obtained in Poland and the United States, the two other countries they surveyed, and concluded that in China, ‘race seems to be accepted as “natural” by all generations of anthropologists.’³¹

Racial theories have underpinned nationalism in China since 1895. Precisely because of the extreme diversity of religious practices, family structures, spoken languages and regional cultures of population groups that have been defined as ‘Chinese,’ the notion of race has become a very powerful and cohesive form of identity. While heavily dependent on the ever-changing language of science, the flexibility of racial theories are part

of their appeal, as different groups, from the late Qing reformers, the anti-Manchu revolutionaries and members of the Nationalist Party to the Chinese Communist Party, have adapted them to very different political and social contexts.

But there is a constant. From the moment the Qing crumbled, the notion of race has been used to portray all parts of the imperial realm, from Taiwan to Xinjiang and Tibet, as organically constitutive of the modern nation-state. This has become particularly obvious since 1949, as the Chinese Communist Party has established the borders of the People's Republic along the territory reached by the Qing at the height of its expansion in the nineteenth century. Just as the Bolsheviks inherited a realm conquered by the tsars, so the communists claimed an empire won by the Manchus. Unlike the Bolsheviks, who set up a union of socialist republics, the leadership in Beijing was soon committed to turning the many peoples inside its borders into a single, homogeneous nationality, referred to as a *Zhonghua minzu*. Racial theories, in other words, are used to represent the political boundaries of the People's Republic as clear biological markers, encompassing an organically unified 'Chinese nationality.'

Notes

- 1 This article is based on Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), to which readers interested in fuller arguments should turn.
- 2 The key work on this issue is Pierre Huard, "Depuis quand avons-nous la notion d'une race jaune?" *Institut Indochinois pour l'Etude de l'Homme* 4 (1942): 40–41; besides the pioneering article of Huard, one can also read Walter Demel, "Wie die Chinesen gelb wurden. Ein Beitrag zur Frühgeschichte der Rassen-theorie," *Historische Zeitschrift* 255 (1992): 625–666; and Michael Keevak, *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
- 3 Ian McMorran, "Wang Fu-chih and the Neo-Confucian Tradition," in *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism*, ed. William T. De Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 438; Ernstjoachim Vierheller, *Nation und Elite im Denken von Wang Fu-chih (1619–1692)* (Hamburg: Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens, 1968), 30.
- 4 Jin He, "Shuo gui" (About ghosts) in *Yapian zhanzheng wenxue ji (Collection of Literary Writings on the Opium War)*, comp. A Ying (Beijing: Guji chubanshe, 1957), 44.
- 5 The following is mainly based on Hu Hsien Chin, *The Common Descent Group in China and Its Functions* (New York: Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology, 1948).
- 6 Harry J. Lamley, "Hsieh-tou: The pathology of violence in south-eastern China," *Ch'ing-shih Wen-t'i*, 3, no. 7 (1977): 1–39; see also Mark C. Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).
- 7 Yan Fu, *Yan Fu shiwen xuan (Selected Poems and Writings of Yan Fu)* (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1959), 22.
- 8 Tang Caichang, *Juedianmingzhai neiyuan (Essays on Political and Historical Matters)* (Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1968), 468.
- 9 Tsou Jung, *The Revolutionary Army: A Chinese Nationalist Tract of 1903*, intro. and transl. by John Lust (Paris: Mouton, 1968), 106.
- 10 Sun Wen (Sun Yatsen), *Sanminzhuyi (The Three Principles)* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1927), 4–5; this translation follows Frank W. Price, *San min chu i: The Three Principles of the People* (Shanghai: China Committee, Institute of Pacific Relations, 1927), 8–9.
- 11 Fu Yunsen, *Renwen dili (Human Geography)* (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1914), 9–15.
- 12 Léon Wieger, *Moralisme officiel des écoles, en 1920* (Hien-hien, 1921), 180, original Chinese text.
- 13 Chen Yucang, *Renti de yanjiu (Research on the Human Body)* (Shanghai: Zhengzhong shuju, 1937), 180.
- 14 Lin Yutang, *My Country and My People* (New York: John Ray, 1935), 26.

- 15 Li Chi, *The Formation of the Chinese People: An Anthropological Inquiry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928); Zhang Junjun, *Zhongguo minzu zhi gaizao (The Reform of the Chinese Race)* (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1935).
- 16 Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, 117–119.
- 17 Pan Guangdan, review of Donald Young, ed., *The American Negro*, in *The China Critic*, Aug. 28, 1930. 838.
- 18 Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, 101.
- 19 An essential book for understanding ethnic nationalism in China is Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); on the project of “ethnic” classification one should read Thomas Mullaney, *Coming to Terms With the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).
- 20 Chiang Kaishek, *China's Destiny* (New York: Roy, 1947), 39–40.
- 21 Material in the next four paragraphs comes from Frank Dikötter, “Reading the body: Genetic knowledge and social marginalisation in the PRC,” *China Information* 13, no. 2–3 (1998): 1–13.
- 22 Zhao Tongmao, *Renlei xuexing yichuanxue (Genetics of Human Blood Groups)* (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1987), 351–371; see also Yuan Yida and Du Ruofu, “Zhongguo shiqige minzu jian de yichuan juli de chubu yanjiu” (“Preliminary investigation of the genetic distance between seventeen ethnic groups in China”), *Yichuan xuebao* 10, no. 5 (1983): 398–405.
- 23 Zhang Zhenbiao, “Zangzu de tizhi tezhenɡ” (“The physical characteristics of the Tibetan nationality”), *Renleixue xuebao* 4, no. 3 (1985): 250–257; the only reference to a European study in Zhang Zhenbiao's research was an article published in 1954 in the *Annals of Eugenics*.
- 24 W.J.F. Jenner, “Race and history in China,” *New Left Review* 11 (2001): 74.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 57.
- 26 Wu Rukang, *Guren leixue (Paleoanthropology)* (Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1989), 205–206; see also Wu Rukang, *Renlei de qi yuan he fazhan (The Origin and Evolution of Ancient Man)* (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1980); on Peking Man, one should also read Barry Sautman, “Myths of descent, racial nationalism and ethnic minorities in the People's Republic of China,” in *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Frank Dikötter (London: Hurst; Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 75–95; Barry Sautman, “Peking Man and the politics of paleo-anthropological nationalism in China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 1 (2001): 95–124.
- 27 For instance, Yang Qun, “Kaoguxue yu renleixue” (Archaeology and anthropology) in *Renleixue yanjiu (Studies in Anthropology)*, ed. Zhongguo renlei xuehui (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1987), 288–302.
- 28 See, for instance, Han Kangxin and Pan Qifeng, “Gudai Zhongguo renzhong chengfen yanjiu” (Research into the racial composition of ancient China), *Kaogu xuebao* 2 (1984): n.p.
- 29 John Reader, *Missing Links: The Hunt for Earliest Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 111.
- 30 “Stirring find in Xuchang,” *China Daily*, Jan. 28, 2008.
- 31 Qian Wang, Goran Štrkalj and Li Sun, “On the concept of race in Chinese biological anthropology: Alive and well (Discussion),” *Current Anthropology* 44, no. 3 (2003): 403.

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