

# **The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan**

**edited by  
Frank Dikötter**

**consulting editor  
Barry Sautman**



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## THE CONTRIBUTORS

*Chow Kai-wing* is Associate Professor in History at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

*Frank Dikötter* is Senior Lecturer in History and Wellcome Research Fellow at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

*David Goodman* is Professor in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

*Kazuki Sato* is Assistant Professor at Sophia University, Tokyo.

*Barry Sautman* is Lecturer in Politics at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

*Richard Siddle* is Research Fellow at the University of Sheffield, England.

*Michael Weiner* is Senior Lecturer at the University of Sheffield, England.

*Kosaku Yoshino* is Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of Tokyo.

*Louise Young* is Associate Professor in History at New York University.

*Xun Zhou* is a doctoral candidate in Religious Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

## INTRODUCTION

*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.’<sup>1</sup>

If, in contemporary Germany, a leading intellectual were to identify the people of that country according to physical features (‘blond hair and blue eyes’) and represent them as a homogeneous descent group (‘the Aryans’), he would be considered to be contributing to the invention of a German racial identity. Unlike other group identities, racial discourse essentialises presumed biological features. Racial theories attempt to root culture in nature, to equate social groups with biological units, and give primacy to 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 primarily as a matter of biological descent, physical appearance and congenital inheritance. Cultural features such as ‘Chinese civilisation’ 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, according to Su Xiaokang, be ‘Chinese’ by virtue of one’s blood.

Because it is considered politically embarrassing, the importance

<sup>1</sup> Su Xiaokang, ‘River Elegy’ in *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, 24, no. 2 (winter 1991-2), p. 9.

of racialised identities in East Asia has so far been deliberately ignored. However, far from being a negligible aspect of contemporary identities, racialised senses of belonging have often been the very foundation of national identity in East Asia in the twentieth century. In their opposition to the systematic investigation of racial discourses and practices in East Asia, some social scientists have argued that 'racism', however defined, cannot be found in 'Asian culture'.<sup>2</sup> For instance, the anthropologist Charles Stafford maintains that 'race' is not a 'Chinese' concept, hence 'racism' can only occur in 'the West'.<sup>3</sup> Let us take an example. Kang Youwei (1858-1927), one of the most acclaimed philosophers of the late nineteenth 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 sterilising medication to stop the perpetuation of their race'.<sup>4</sup> In his description of Africans, Kang Youwei used the terms *renzhong* ('human breed', 'human race') and *zhongzu* ('breed', 'race') 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'.<sup>5</sup> The virulent racial discourse of a prominent reformer has been transformed into an inconsequential utterance which does not 'belong' to 'Chinese culture'. 'Racism', it is argued, like 'human rights' is a 'Western concept' with no equivalent in China. At recent meetings in Geneva of the United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination Chinese delegates have upheld precisely the same argument, a rhetorical strategy

<sup>2</sup> For instance David Y.F. Ho, 'Prejudice, colonialism, and interethnic relations: An East-West dialogue', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 20 (1985), pp. 224-5.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Stafford, 'The discourse of race in modern China', *Man: The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 28, no. 3 (Sept. 1993), p. 609.

<sup>4</sup> Kang Youwei, *Datongshu* (One World), Beijing: Guji chubanshe, 1956, pp. 118-22.

<sup>5</sup> Stafford, 'The discourse', p. 609.

used to delay the introduction of clear definitions of racial discrimination into the country's legal system.

However, racial discourse cannot be reduced to the mere appearance of the word 'race'. In English, for instance, the word has had a number of very different meanings and connotations since the Middle Ages; only during the nineteenth century did it begin to refer to alleged biological differences between groups of people.<sup>6</sup> 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 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.

Similarly, many terms were used in China and Japan from the late nineteenth century onwards to represent these countries as biologically specific entities: *zu* ('lineage', 'clan'), *zhong* ('seed', 'breed', 'type', 'race'), *zulei* ('type of lineage'), *minzu* ('lineage of people', 'nationality', 'race'), *zhongzu* ('breed of lineage', 'type of lineage', 'breed', 'race') and *renzhong* ('human breed', 'human race') in Chinese, and *jinshu* ('human breed', 'human race'), *shuzoku* ('breed of lineage', 'type of lineage', 'breed', 'race') and *minzoku* ('lineage of people', 'nationality', 'race') in Japanese. All acquire different meanings in different contexts. The question a historian should ask is what type of identity is shaped by these different terms in specific circumstances. *Minzu*, to take a notorious example, is often simply translated as 'nationality', but it means different things for a variety of authors in China throughout the twentieth century. Between 1902 and 1911 *minzu* as a term was used to promote symbolic boundaries of blood and descent: 'nationalities' as political units were equated with 'races' as biological units. In nationalist theories of the 1900s, *minzu* was thought to be based on a quantifiable number of people called 'Chinese', a

<sup>6</sup> Michael Banton, *Racial Theories*, Cambridge University Press, 1987.

group with clear boundaries by virtue of imagined blood ties, kinship and descent. As Sun Yatsen (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.’<sup>7</sup> In Japan, increasing numbers of intellectuals after the First World War defined the *minzoku* as a distinct people with shared physical attributes and pure blood whose origins could be traced back to the palaeolithic period. Ethnicity continued to be identified with biological descent in the period between the two World Wars, while cultural and racial characteristics constantly overlapped in political, anthropological and medical literature. Throughout the twentieth century, in fact, the notion of *minzu* in China and *minzoku* in Japan has consistently conflated ideas of culture, ethnicity and race in efforts to represent cultural features as secondary to, and derivative of, an imagined biological essence. Racial definitions have constantly been deployed in order to account for cultural differences. The historian of racial identities, in short, 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 naturalise cultural differences between population groups.

While the reality of racial discourse and practice in East Asia is sometimes recognised, 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, marginalised or trivialised. For instance, when racial discourse is defined in terms of features which are specific to a European context (‘white racism’), the specific articulations which have emerged in China and Japan are seen as ‘special cases’ which threaten to deconstruct the ideal type.<sup>8</sup> Far from being fixed

<sup>7</sup> Sun Wen (Sun Yatsen), *Sanminzhuyi* (The Three Principles of the People), Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1927, pp. 4–5.

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed discussion of essentialism in explanations of racism, see the excellent article of Philip Cohen, ‘It’s racism what dunnit’: Hidden narratives in theories of racism’ in James Donald and Ali Rattansi (eds), *Race, culture and difference*, London: Sage, 1992, pp. 83–4.

or static entities, the adaptability of racial theories in different historical circumstances should be recognised if their enduring appeal is to be understood. There is, nonetheless, a common thread to different 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 discourse combines in varying degrees with ethnocentrism, where groups of people are defined primarily in cultural terms, and furthermore intersects with discourses of gender, sexuality, social status, region and age to produce different meanings. Socially constructed 'races', in other words, are population groups which are imagined to have boundaries based on immutable biological or other inherent characteristics, and can be contrasted to socially constructed 'ethnicities', which are groups thought to be based on culturally acquired characteristics: the ways in which boundaries are created and maintained are distinct, although they clearly overlap in many cases.

Racial definitions of difference, of course, are not specific to East Asia only. Although genetic research has long established that there are only trivial biological differences between population groups defined as 'races', differential and inequitable treatment in the West has been justified on arbitrary scientific grounds ever since the rise of biological theories in the nineteenth century. The number of genes involved in surface traits (melanin, hair and stature) is insignificant, and the diversity and variations between individuals are so enormous that the entire concept of 'race', however defined, has become utterly meaningless. Genetic diversity is more or less evenly distributed over the entire human species, and there is no justification to support the view that socially significant groups are grounded on genetic differences. In some European countries, however, racial discourses and practices were produced by political groups and scientific institutions until the end of the Second World War, while racial discrimination persisted at an official level in the United States until a few decades ago. More recently, the transformation of political economies and cultures in the West has led to the emergence of new motives for discrimination, in particular in Britain, France, Germany and the United States.

Although a considerable body of scholarly work has highlighted the historical and contemporary dimensions of racialised identities in the West, almost nothing is known about the invention, articulation and deployment of racial frames of reference in East Asia. However, official policies endorsing racial discrimination and leading to abuses of human rights can be found in most East Asian states. Myths of origins, ideologies of blood and theories of biological descent have formed a central part in the cultural construction of identity in China and Japan since the nationalist movements of the late nineteenth century. Naturalised as a pure and homogeneous 'Yamato race' in Japan, or as a biological descent group from the 'Yellow Emperor' in China, political territories have been conflated with imaginary biological entities by nationalist writers. As the different contributions to this volume emphasise, modernising élites in East Asia endowed foreign cultural repertoires with indigenous meanings. Cultural intermediaries – educators, journalists, academics, doctors and scientists – appropriated the language of science, indigenised evolutionary theories, reinterpreted racial ideologies and actively reconstructed their own definitions of identity. They often constructed racial discourse on the basis of more stable notions of purity and descent. In Japan, for instance, the language of blood, expressing a notion of immutable difference, was strengthened through the selective appropriation of evolutionary theories, in particular from Arthur de Gobineau and other nineteenth-century racial theorists. Ideas of purity and pollution, an integral part of folk models of identity in Japan, were also reconfigured in the propagation of ideas about the divine origins of the imperial line and the racial and cultural homogeneity of the Japanese people. Established modes of representation centred on the lineage (*zu*) in China and the family (*ie*) in Japan were also fundamental to cultural processes of articulating and defining the nature of difference. Folk notions of patrilineal descent in China were reconfigured into a racial discourse which thrived on the semantic similarity between *zu* as lineage and *zu* as race: *huangzhong* as a new racialised identity invented by the reformers at the end of the nineteenth century meant both 'lineage of the Yellow Emperor' and 'yellow race'. In both countries, moreover, Confucian social hierarchies underwent a permutation into new racial taxonomies: binary distinctions between 'superior races' (*liangzhong*) and 'inferior races' (*jianzhong*) were often extrapolated

from existing social hierarchies, which had divided 'common people' (*liangmin*) from 'mean people' (*jianmin*) in China until their legal abolition by the Yongzheng emperor in 1723 (social discrimination persisted until the twentieth century). Africans were referred to in China and Japan as the 'black slave race' until the end of the 1920s. The opening sentence of a textbook written in 1918 by China's first Professor in Anthropology put it concisely: 'Anthropology studies all races, from the Chinese and the English down to the dwarf slave [i.e. the Japanese] and the black slave.'<sup>9</sup> Different population groups were thus assigned a low social status as 'slaves': their social inequality was made to appear permanent and immutable through a discourse of race which firmly located these social differences inside the body.

Cultural definitions of 'civilisation' versus 'barbarism' – widespread in the Confucian symbolic universe – were also racialised into binary oppositions between 'advanced' and 'backward' groups of people: in the popular imagery of twentieth-century Japan, China was portrayed as an exotic and different 'race' in stark contrast to the cultural and biological uniqueness of Japan. Scientific literature on the superior physical attributes which distinguished the Japanese in tropical climates was paralleled by the spread of woodblock prints in which 'darker races' were portrayed as short yellow-skinned figures or dark thick-lipped cannibals. In the context of colonial expansion to Korea and China, it was assumed that the differences in economic and political capacities of the peoples of East Asia were the result of natural or biological laws: colonial populations were regularly contrasted with Japanese modernity. 'Spiritual and physical purity' were said to be the attributes which marked the Japanese as the 'leading race' in their divine mission in Asia. In war-time Japan, a sense of unique purity – both moral and genetic – was central to the notion of racial separateness in which other population groups were dehumanised as beasts and ultimately as demons. In both China and Japan, other population groups were also ranked according to their presumed physical attributes.

Since evolution was interpreted as an inevitable ascent through a preordained hierarchy of stages, modernising élites in East Asia not only deployed racial hierarchies in which 'savage tribes' were

<sup>9</sup> Chen Yinghuang, *Renleixue* (Anthropology), Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, (1st edn 1918) 1928, p. 5.

represented as throwbacks on the evolutionary scale, but also portrayed women and children as the lower stages of evolutionary growth. The different social roles of men and women were increasingly thought to be firmly grounded in inescapable biological laws, and gender hierarchy was represented as the natural result of an unequal endowment. New gender distinctions, based on presumed biological characteristics such as the quality of blood, the size of the pelvis, the structure of the brain and general stature, established a hierarchical relationship in which women were represented as inferior and passive versions of men. Portrayed as the guardians of the 'race', women were excluded from having a public role and were assigned a primary responsibility over the reproductive health of the nation.

Racial discourse, in other words, appealed to and was supported by a diversity of people precisely because it was based on common folk models of identity, in particular patrilineal descent and common stock. While it is undoubtedly true the state was instrumental in the deployment of racial theories and disseminating them among the general public by means of school textbooks, anthropology exhibitions and travel literature, a degree of reciprocal interaction between popular culture and official discourse could be suggested. More stable folk notions of patrilineal descent, widespread in late imperial China, were reconfigured in the twentieth century into a discourse of 'racial strength', 'genetic inheritance' and 'sexual hygiene'. Scientised by cultural intermediaries, indigenous notions of identity were reinforced and enriched by the use of new biological vocabularies. Racial discourse in China and Japan thrived and evolved over time because it reconfigured pre-existing notions of identity and simultaneously appealed to a variety of groups, from popular audiences to groups of scientists.

Most contributors to this volume underline the importance of 'power' in the articulation of racial taxonomies. From the subordination of colonised populations in prewar Japan to the dispossession of so-called 'national minorities' of natural resources in China today, racial knowledge has been deployed to subordinate and dominate entire groups of people. Political power, social privilege and economic exploitation have all been legitimised by the invention of racial boundaries, in particular in China and Japan. However, domination and subjugation need not necessarily figure at the centre of racial discourse. Beyond the direct economic

and political power that may be gained in the racialisation of social relations, the drawing of racial boundaries between Self and Other is often about imagined inclusions and exclusions. 'Race' was seen by many nationalists in China as the only concept capable of including both peasant and emperor. The revolutionary Zou Rong greeted the 'peasants with weatherbeaten faces and mudcaked hands and feet' as the proud descendants of the Yellow Emperor:<sup>10</sup> blood was thought to overarch gender, lineage, class and region to integrate the nation's citizens into a powerful community. The power of inclusion unleashed by racial discourse was a fundamental part of its appeal, in particular for social groups which had traditionally been marginalised (youth were acclaimed as the vanguard of the race, women were celebrated as the guardians of future generations, farmers were hailed for their physical vigour). At the same time as racial discourse created and shaped racially defined inclusions, it produced racially excluded Others, notably 'Blacks' or 'Jews', although these may not have had a significant presence in Asia comparable to Europe and the United States. However, as some of the chapters in this book attest, they are central in the racial taxonomies devised in China and Japan throughout the twentieth century. Less the result of a social encounter conditioned by political domination, their invention is more part of a network of symbolic relations which fulfill contradictory and ambiguous roles: harbingers of decline ('the stateless Jews') or repositories of hope ('Jewish international finance'), their real object has been the construction of the self in which racialised others remain distant mirrors. Racial discourse, which has sometimes been more about imagined cultural inclusions than about real social encounters, has shaped the identity of millions of people in East Asia: although it is a historically contingent object which is constantly rearticulated in adaptations to changing environments, its fundamental role in creating both Self and Other has given it a particular kind of resilience so that it often survives social, economic and political changes.

The construction of symbolic boundaries between racially constituted categories has gone through many transformations in China

<sup>10</sup> Tsou Jung, *The revolutionary army: A Chinese nationalist tract of 1903*, intro. and transl. by J. Lust, Paris: Mouton, 1968, p. 72.

and Japan in the twentieth century, but the attempt to mark, naturalise and rank real or imagined differences between population groups remains widespread. However, in East Asia, in contrast to other regions, there is no clear sign that the hierarchies of power maintained through racial discourse are being questioned by the cultural centres of authority. Notions of racial homogeneity continue today to inform debates about 'Japaneseness' (*nihonjinron*), punctuated by ideas about 'Japanese blood' and claims for a 'Japanese-length intestine'. Racialised representations of foreigners also remain relatively widespread: from the first encounter with black sailors sent by Commodore Perry in 1853 to Taisuke Fujishima's recent essay entitled 'We Cannot Marry Negroes', blackness has become a symbol of the savage Other in Japan. The recent influx of foreign workers into Japan has also led to expressions of fear of cultural or racial contamination. The Japanese government, in fact, decided not to ratify the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. In China too, the racialisation of identity has recently increased both within government circles and within relatively independent intellectual spheres, particularly since the erosion of communist authority after the Tiananmen events in 1989. Imagined as an inferior species, African students are periodically subjected to racial attacks on the university campuses of the People's Republic of China.

Theories of racial purity have combined with dubious studies in anthropometry in official efforts to legitimise discrimination against social groups such as the Tibetans and the Uighurs. The official promotion of China as the 'homeland of the Modern Yellow Race' has far-reaching consequences not only for minority groups inside the political boundaries of the PRC. Outer Mongolia, for instance, has recently been portrayed as an 'organic and integral part' of the 'Chinese race'. 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. Similar to the first decades of the twentieth century, moreover, the multiplication of regional identities and the emergence of cultural diversity could prompt a number of political figures to appeal to racialised senses of belonging in order to overcome internal divisions. In contrast, multiple identities, free choice of ethnicity and ambiguity in group membership are not likely to appear as viable alternatives to more essentialist models

of group definition. The racialisation of identity, it should finally be underlined, has often led to the rejection of hybridity, fluidity and heterogeneity in contemporary East Asia.

The construction of racial identities has become particularly important since the rise of nationalist movements in the late nineteenth century, but primordial senses of belonging based on blood remain as salient in East Asia as they are in Europe and in the United States. In an era of economic globalisation and political depolarisation, racial identities and racial discrimination have increased in East Asia, affecting both the human rights of marginalised groups and collective perceptions of the world order. Official policies endorsing racial discrimination and leading to abuses of human rights can be found in most East Asian states. Efforts to reduce or eliminate all forms of discrimination on an international scale will not succeed without the active support of a part of the world which accounts for a quarter of mankind. Racialised identities and their effect on human rights in East Asia are a serious and potentially explosive issue of the last decade of the twentieth century which needs to be fully addressed. However, as the result of an excessively narrow frame of analysis which has reduced the formation of racialised identities in the contemporary world to a uniquely 'Western' phenomenon, the current state of the field and the available expertise on these issues is dangerously underdeveloped. The aim of this volume is to open up that field and point to a number of possible avenues for future research. It does not pretend to offer a unitary and integrated perspective, nor does it compare in any systematic way the racial identities forged in East Asia. Its contributors are located at different level of research, some focusing on specific authors or particular periods, others offering more general overviews of the field. However fragmentary the state of our knowledge may be in this early stage, it is hoped that the book will stimulate further interest in the historical dimensions of the construction of racial identities in China and Japan.

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