

The Construction
of
Racial Identities
in
China and Japan

Historical and
Contemporary Perspectives

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Part I. CHINA

RACIAL DISCOURSE IN CHINA
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Was the notion of a 'yellow race' imposed on China by Europeans in the late nineteenth century? The term only appeared in Europe at the end of the seventeenth century, probably in response to Jesuit reports on the symbolic significance of the colour yellow in China. It 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'.¹ 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'. The first scientific work in which the notion of a 'yellow race' appeared was François Bernier's 'Étrennes adressées à Madame de la Sablière pour l'année 1688'.² In China, however, the symbolic meanings ascribed to the colour yellow placed it in a privileged position in the construction of social identities. Yellow, one of the five 'pure' colours in China, had long been symbolic of grandeur and of the emperor. In both popular and literate culture, yellow was the colour of the Emperor of the Middle Kingdom, ancestral home of the 'descendants of the Yellow Emperor' who, it was claimed, had originated in the valley of the Yellow River. Wang

Fuzhi (1619-92), a seventeenth-century scholar who wrote after the fall of the Ming and the invasion of China by the Manchus, 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' (*huang-zhong*).³ On more popular discursive registers, legends circulated about the origins of mankind in which noble people were said to be made out of yellow mud and ignoble people of vulgar rope.⁴ These folk accounts were appropriated and rearticulated into a racial identity by scholars in the late nineteenth century. Huang Zunxian (1848-1905), for instance, recorded in his diary when aged twenty that 'all men are fashioned out of yellow mud'. At the age of fifty-four, as one of the most outstanding reformers and an important architect in the racialisation of identity, he publicly wondered 'Why is the yellow race not the only race in the world?'⁵ 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 which was actively mobilised 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.⁶

Chinese reformers in the 1890s were active agents who participated in the invention of their identities. They were not the passive recipients of a 'derivative discourse', but creative individuals who selectively appropriated elements of foreign thought systems in a process of cultural interaction. More important, the reform movement which contributed so much to the invention of racial identities in China was largely the product of complex interactions

³ E. Vierheller, *Nation und Elite im Denken von Wang Fu-chih (1619-1692)*, Hamburg: Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens, 1968, pp. 30 and 124.

⁴ *Taiping yulan* (Song encyclopaedia), quoting the Later Han work 'Fengsutong', Taipei: Xinxing shuju, 1959, p. 1693 (360: 5a). See also Zhou Jianren, 'Renzhong qiyuan shuo' (Legends about the origins of human races), *Dongfang zazhi*, 16, no. 11 (June 1919), pp. 93-100.

⁵ Noriko Kamachi, *Reform in China: Huang Tsun-hsien and the Japanese model*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981, pp. 15, 141.

⁶ 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 Centre, 1976, pp. 64-5.

¹ Jan Nieuwhof, *Het gezantschap der Neerlandische Oost-Indische Compagnie aan den Grooten Tartarischen Cham den tegenwoordigen Keizer van China*, Amsterdam: Jacob van Meurs, 1665, p. 173.

² Pierre Huard, 'Depuis quand avons-nous la notion d'une race jaune?', *Institut Indochinois pour l'Etude de l'Homme*, 4 (1942), pp. 40-1.

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. In other words, racial identities during the late imperial period 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. Far from being a 'derivative discourse' of a more 'authentic' form of 'white racism', narratives of blood and descent in China had an internal cohesion which was based on the active reconfiguration of indigenous modes of representation. Lineage discourse was perhaps one of the most prominent elements in the construction of symbolic boundaries between racially defined groups of people.⁷

THE RECONFIGURATION OF LINEAGE DISCOURSE AND THE EMERGENCE OF RACIAL TAXONOMIES

The racial categories of analysis which first emerged in China with the rise of nationalism were largely constructed on the basis of indigenous modes of representation, in particular lineage discourse. The Qing era was marked by a consolidation of the cult of patrilineal descent, centre of a broad movement of social reform that had emphasised the family and the lineage (*zu*) since the collapse of the Ming.⁸ Considerable friction arose between lineages throughout the nineteenth century in response to heightened competition over natural resources, the need to control market towns, the gradual erosion of social order and organisational disorders caused by demography pressures.⁹ Lineage feuds as well as interethnic conflicts (*fenlei xiedou*) prevailed throughout the empire, but were more common in the south-east, where the institution of the lineage had grown more powerful than in the north. The militarisation of powerful lineages reinforced folk

⁷ The following sections are discussed in much greater detail in Frank Dikötter, *The discourse of race in modern China*; London: C. Hurst; Stanford University Press; Hong Kong University Press, 1992.

⁸ Kai-wing Chow, *The rise of Confucian ritualism in late imperial China: Ethics, Classics, and lineage discourse*, Stanford University Press, 1994.

⁹ See H.J. Lamley, 'Hsieh-tou: The pathology of violence in south-eastern China', *Ch'ing-shih Wen-t'i*, 3, no. 7 (Nov. 1977), pp. 1-39.

models of kinship solidarity, forcing in turn more loosely organised associations to form a unified descent group under the leadership of the gentry. At court level, too, ideologies of descent became increasingly important, in particular with the erosion of a sense of cultural identity among Manchu aristocrats. Racial identity through patrilineal descent became important in the Qianlong period (1736-95), when the court progressively turned towards a rigid taxonomy of distinct descent lines (*zu*) to distinguish between Han, Manchu, Mongol or Tibetan.¹⁰ Within three distinct social levels – popular culture, gentry society and court politics – the deployment of more stable folk notions of patrilineal descent became widespread in the creation and maintenance of group boundaries.

The racialisation of lineage discourse during the last decade of the nineteenth century was largely the work of the 1898 reformers, who championed a radical transformation of imperial institutions and orthodox ideology. In contrast to their precursors, they promoted an alternative body of knowledge which derived its legitimacy independently from the official examination system. It was the product of a fusion between different indigenous strains of knowledge and foreign discursive repertoires, with the principal object of political attention being the species. The scientific category of 'race' and the administrative category of 'population' were heralded as objects worthy of systematic investigation. Folk models of shared kinship and élite notions of belonging were the two most dominant variations of lineage discourse: popular culture and élite culture stressed patrilineal descent in the creation and maintenance of group boundaries. Cultural intermediaries like Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei selectively appropriated scientific knowledge from foreign discursive repertoires, actively manipulated evolutionary theories to bolster theories of pure origins; they reconfigured folk notions of patrilineal descent into a racial discourse which represented all inhabitants of China as the descendants of the Yellow Emperor. The semantic similarity between *zu* as lineage and *zu* as race was rearticulated in a new racialised identity called *huangzhong*, meaning both 'lineage of the Yellow Emperor' and 'yellow race'. Extrapolating from an indigenous vision of

¹⁰ Pamela Kyle Crossley, 'The Qianlong retrospect on the Chinese-martial (*hanjun*) banners', *Late Imperial China*, 10, no. 1 (June 1989), pp. 63-107, and 'Thinking about ethnicity in early modern China', *Late Imperial China*, 11, no. 1 (June 1990), p. 20.

lineage feuds, which permeated the social landscape of late imperial China, the reformers ordered mankind into a racial hierarchy of biological groups where 'yellows' competed with 'whites' over degenerate breeds of 'browns', 'blacks' and 'reds'. Thriving on its affinity with lineage discourse, 'race' thus gradually emerged as the most common symbol of national cohesion, permanently replacing more conventional emblems of cultural identity. The threat of racial extinction (*miezhong*), a powerful message of fear based on more popular anxieties about lineage extinction (*miezu*), was often raised to bolster the reformers' message of change: '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?'¹¹ In the reformers' symbolic network of racialised Others, the dominating 'white' and 'yellow races' were opposed to the 'darker races', doomed by hereditary inadequacy to racial extinction. Liang Qichao rearticulated traditional social hierarchies into a new racial taxonomy of 'noble' (*guizhong*) and 'low' (*jianzhong*), 'superior' (*youzhong*) and 'inferior' (*liezhong*), 'historical' and 'ahistorical races' (*youlishi de zhongzu*). The widespread distinction between 'common people' (*liangmin*) and 'mean people' (*jianmin*) that had officially characterised late imperial China up till the early eighteenth century also found an echo in Tang Caichang (1867-1900), who opposed 'fine races' (*liangzhong*) to 'mean races' (*jianzhong*). He phrased it in evenly balanced clauses reminiscent of the classical language: '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.'¹²

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 Shipai (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 preservation

¹¹ Yan Fu, *Yan Fu shiwen xuan* (Selected poems and writings of Yan Fu), Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1959, p. 22.

¹² Tang Caichang, *Juedianmingzhai neiyuan* (Essays on political and historical matters), Taipei: Wenhai chubanshe, 1968, p. 468.

of the race, so we use the birth of the Yellow Emperor as a founding date.'¹³ Early twentieth-century revolutionaries like Chen Tianhua (1875-1905) infused kin terms, previously deployed in lineage discourse, 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.'¹⁴ The first issue of the *Tides of Zhejiang*, a nationalist journal published in Japan by Chinese students, stated that 'those who are able to group their own tribe into an organised body able to resist other groups will survive.' In an era dominated by 'racial competition', the key to survival lay in the cohesive force of the group (*qunli*). Nationalism fostered unity, as it 'erects borders against the outside and unites the group inside'.¹⁵ A contributor to the journal *Yunnan* attributed the decline of the 'barbarian red and the savage black races' to their ignorance of the racial principles of nationalism: a nation needed a 'group strategy and group strength'.¹⁶ World politics were expounded in terms of racial cohesion. India, for instance, had been conquered by the 'white race' because its class system inhibited racial homogeneity.¹⁷ Russians were a 'crossbreed between Europeans and Asians and nothing else', another polemicist claimed. A cranial analysis and a detailed racial investigation revealed that the Russians had Asian blood running in their veins. This racial mix was responsible for Russia's inability to group.¹⁸ The naval superiority of the United States, on the other hand, was ascribed to its racial quality: were not the Americans an inch taller than the English?¹⁹ Culture, nation and race had

¹³ Liu Shipai, 'Huangdi jinian shuo' (About a calendar based on the Yellow Emperor), *Huangdi hun* (The soul of the Yellow Emperor), 1904, p. 1; reprinted, Taipei: Zhonghua minguo shiliao congbian, 1968.

¹⁴ Chen Tianhua, *Chen Tianhua ji* (Collected works of Chen Tianhua), Changsha: Hunan renmin chubanshe, 1982, p. 81.

¹⁵ Yuyi, 'Minzuzhuyi lun' (On nationalism), *Zhejiangchao*, 1 (Feb. 1903), p. 3.

¹⁶ *Yunnan*, 1 (Aug. 1906), pp. 7-12.

¹⁷ 'Yindu miwang zhi yuanyin' (The reasons for the extinction of India), *Zhejiangchao*, 1 (Feb. 1903), pp. 4-6.

¹⁸ Feisheng, 'Eren zhi xingzhi' (The Russians' nature), *Zhejiangchao*, 1 (Feb. 1903), pp. 4-5, 2 (March 1903), pp. 77-9.

¹⁹ Taosheng, 'Haishang de Meiren' (The Americans on the sea), *Zhejiangchao*, 6 (Aug. 1903), p. 2.

become coterminous in the symbolic universe of China's revolutionaries.

RACIAL DISCOURSE IN REPUBLICAN CHINA

The imperial reformers failed to secure the power necessary to implement their vision of change. However, the promotion of racial definitions of identity would become widespread after the fall of the Qing empire in 1911, a momentous political event which was marked by a number of important developments. First came the rapid transformation of the traditional gentry into powerful new élites, such as factory managers, bankers, lawyers, doctors, scientists, educators and journalists – the result of new economic opportunities created through contacts with foreign traders and the closer integration of the country into a global economy. The gradual emergence of new social formations was particularly pronounced in the large metropolises of the coast. Based on a common ground of social values, a sophisticated network of relations webbed intellectuals, urban notables and financial élites together into a modernising avant-garde. Secondly, with the collapse of the imperial system, neo-Confucian knowledge rapidly lost its credibility and authority. Previously imagined as a purposeful whole, a benevolent structure which could not exist independently from ethical forces, 'nature' was now conceptualised as a set of impersonal forces that could be objectively investigated. No longer were physical bodies thought to be linked to the cosmological foundations of the universe: bodies were produced by biological laws inherent in 'nature'. With the decline of conformity to the moral imperatives enshrined in a canon of Confucian texts, a growing number of people believed 'truth' to be encoded in a nature which only science could decipher: identity, ancestry and meaning were buried deep inside the body. Embryology or genetics could establish differences between population groups, not philology or palaeography. Human biology replaced imperial cosmology as the epistemological foundation for social order. Thirdly, private printing houses, run by private associations of merchants, greatly profited from increased demand for new books and the general growth in literacy after the fall of the empire, and rapidly grew into huge publishing companies. The printed pages which poured forth from the vernacular press greatly

facilitated the accessibility of new cultural modes to a larger public of consumers.

Shared consumption of cultural products which heralded the demise of 'primitive races' and the regeneration of the 'yellow race' contributed to the construction of imagined boundaries based on blood. The epistemic shift from cosmology to biology was particularly evident in studies in anthropometry, craniology and raciology. Racial categories of analysis were consolidated by endless references to science. Folk notions of biological discontinuity, of course, had long existed in popular culture. To this day, for instance, the Cantonese describe the Tanka, a population group of boat-dwellers in South China, as people with six toes on each foot: they are claimed to be of non-Han descent.²⁰ The small toenails of the Mongols are said by the Han to be cloven,²¹ while minorities in Hainan have long been alleged to have a tail. A variety of cultural intermediaries – social reformers, professional writers, medical researchers, university professors – scientised these folk notions of common stock and legitimised racial discourse through appeals to the authority of science. Chen Yucang (1889–1947), director of the Medical College of Tongji University and a secretary to the Legislative Yuan, boldly postulated that cranial weight was the only indicator of the degree of civilisation: 'If we compare the cranial weights of different people, the civilised are somewhat heavier than the savages, and the Chinese brain is slightly heavier than the European brain.'²² 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,²³ while the absence of body hair came to symbolise 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

²⁰ Barbara E. Ward, 'Varieties of the conscious model: The fishermen of South China' in Michael Banton (ed.), *The relevance of models for social anthropology*, London: Tavistock, 1965, p. 118.

²¹ Naran Bilik, 'Mongols: Moral Authority, Nationality and Racial Metaphor', and Pang Kong-feng, 'The Structuration of Racism: Theory and Practice', papers presented at the International Conference on Racial Identities, Hong Kong, 25–26 November 1994.

²² Chen Yucang, *Renli de yanjiu* (Research on the human body), Shanghai: Zhengzhong shuju, 1937, p.180.

²³ Liang Boqiang, 'Yixueshang Zhongguo minzu zhi yanjiu' (Medical research on the Chinese race), *Dongfang zazhi* (Eastern miscellany), no. 13 (July 1926), pp. 87–100.

that a perfectly bare *mons veneris* is not uncommon in Chinese women.²⁴ Archaeologists, too, sought evidence of human beginnings in China. Like many of his contemporaries, Lin Yan cited the discovery of Peking Man at Zhoukoudian as evidence that the 'Chinese race' had existed on the soil of the Middle Kingdom since the earliest stage of civilisation. Excavations supported his hypotheses by demonstrating that migrations had taken place only within the empire. It was concluded that China was inhabited by 'the earth's most ancient original inhabitants'.²⁵

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.'²⁶ In a popular introduction to the 'human races of the world', professor Gu Shoubai wrote that black people could be recognised by their smell. They had a 'protruding jaw, very thick lips, a narrow forehead' and emitted an offensive stench.²⁷ Professor Gong Tingzhang claimed that even the slightest physical contact with a black person was enough for the olfactory organs to be repelled by an 'amazing stench'.²⁸ The presumed inferiority of African people was made to appear permanent and immutable through a discourse of race which firmly located social differences inside the body: the use of the term 'black slave race', common in China until the 1920s, most clearly expressed the conflation of social and racial differences. Chen Jianshan, the popular evolutionist, classified the 'black slave' with the chimpanzees, gorillas and Australians as a branch of

²⁴ Lin Yutang, *My country and my people*, New York: John Ray, 1935, p. 26.

²⁵ Lin Yan, *Zhongguo minzu de youlai* (Origins of the Chinese race), Shanghai: Yongxiang yinshuguan, 1947, p. 27.

²⁶ Du Yaquan et al. (eds), *Dongwuxue da cidian* (Great dictionary of zoology), Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1927 (1st edn 1923), p. 15.

²⁷ Gu Shoubai, *Renleixue dayi* (Main points of anthropology), Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1924, p. 51.

²⁸ Gong Tingzhang, *Renlei yu wenhua jinbu shi* (History of the progress of mankind and culture), Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1926, pp. 1 and 55.

the propithecantropus.²⁹ A popular zoology textbook first published in 1916 included a paragraph on the differences between man and ape. The 'inferior races' (*liedeng zhongzu*) had a facial index similar to that of the orang-utan. The 'black slave' was classified in the gorilla branch, and Malays were represented as descendants of the orang-utan.³⁰

Racialised senses of identity also permeated 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.'³¹ 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.'³² 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. The success of racial discourse in China, in short, was the result of a significant degree of convergence between popular culture and officially sponsored discourses of race, of the scientisation of folk models of identity and of the reconfiguration of more stable notions of descent, lineage and genealogy.

²⁹ Chen Jianshan, 'Shi renlei' (Explaining mankind), *Minduo zazhi*, 5, no.1 (March 1924, p.7).

³⁰ Chen Darong, *Dongwu yu rensheng* (Animals and life), Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1928 (1st edn 1916), pp. 8-13. The author thus echoed the 'polyphyletic theory' first expounded by Carl Vogt in 1865, in which he identified a different anthropoid ape with each human race; see Léon Poliakov, *Le mythe aryen. Essai sur les sources du racisme et des nationalismes*, Bruxelles: Editions Complexe, 1987, p. 316.

³¹ Fu Yunsen, *Renwen dili* (Human geography), Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1914, pp. 9-15.

³² Léon Wieger, *Moralisme officiel des écoles, en 1920*, Hien-hien, 1921, p.180, original Chinese text.

Some isolated voices in China openly contested the existence of a racial taxonomy in mankind: Zhang Junmai, for instance, wisely excluded 'common blood' from his definition of the nation.³³ Qi Sihe also criticised the use of racial categories of analysis in China, and pointed out how 'race' was a declining notion in the West.³⁴ Generally, however, racial discourse was a dominant practice which cut across most political positions, from the fascist core of the Guomindang to the communist theories of Li Dazhao.³⁵ Its fundamental role in the construction of racialised boundaries between Self and Other, its powerful appeal to a cultural sense of belonging based on presumed immutable links of blood, its authoritative worldview in which social differences could be explained in terms of stable biological laws, all these aspects provided racial discourse with a singular resilience: it shaped the identity of millions of people in Republican China, as it had done for people in Europe and the United States.

Conflicting feelings of superiority and inferiority were part of the racialisation of social encounters. As Hong Yuan observed in 1930, 'Most of the [Chinese] people, however, continue to think of our race as inherently superior to that of our neighbours of lighter or darker skin. Indeed there is very often a set of superiority and inferiority complexes stirring within those who have constant or occasional contacts with foreigners. He constantly persuades himself of his unexplainable superiority over the foreigner, but frequently has to rationalize in order to disperse the inferiority complex'.³⁶ Racial classifications between different population groups were so important that they often preceded and shaped real social encounters. The poet Wen Yiduo, for instance, sailed for the United States in 1922, but even on board his courage ebbed away as he felt increasingly apprehensive of racial discrimination in the West. In America he felt lonely and homesick: he described himself as the 'Exiled Prisoner'. Wen Yiduo wrote home: 'For a thoughtful young Chinese, the taste

³³ Zhang Junmai, *Minzu fuxing zhi xueshu jinchu* (The scientific foundations for national revival), Beijing: Zaishengshe, 1935, pp. 10, 22.

³⁴ Qi Sihe, 'Zhongzu yu minzu' (Race and nationality), *Yugong*, 7, nos 1-2-3 (April 1937), pp. 25-34.

³⁵ See Maurice Meisner, 'Class, nation, and race' in *Li Ta-chao and the origins of Chinese Marxism*, New York: Atheneum, 1970, pp. 188-94.

³⁶ Frederick Hung (Hong Yuan), 'Racial superiority and inferiority complex', *The China Critic*, 9 Jan. 1930, p. 29.

of life here in America is beyond description. When I return home for New Year, the year after next, I shall talk with you around the fire, I shall weep bitterly and shed tears to give vent to all the accumulated indignation. I have a nation, I have a history and a culture of five thousand years: how can this be inferior to the Americans?'³⁷ His resentment against 'the West' cumulated in a poem entitled 'I am Chinese':

*I am Chinese, I am Chinese,
I am the divine blood of the Yellow Emperor,
I came from the highest place in the world,
Pamir is my ancestral place,
My race is like the Yellow River,
We flow down the Kunlun mountain slope,
We flow across the Asian continent,
From us have flowed exquisite customs.
Mighty nation! Mighty nation.*³⁸

It is undeniable that some Chinese students genuinely suffered from racial discrimination abroad, although undoubtedly an element of self-victimisation and self-humiliation entered into the composition of such feelings. More important, however, they often interpreted their social encounters abroad from a cultural repertoire which reinforced the racialisation of Others. Even social experiences that had the potential to destabilise their sense of identity were appropriated and integrated into a racial frame of reference. Pan Guangdan, the most outspoken proponent of eugenics in China, expressed his disappointment with the unwillingness of a book entitled *The American Negro*, edited by Donald Young in 1928, to speak in terms of racial inequality:

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

³⁷ Wen Yiduo, *Wen Yiduo quanji* (Complete works of Wen Yiduo), Hong Kong: Yuandong tushu gongsi, 1968, vol. 1, p. 40.

³⁸ Wen Yiduo, 'Wo shi Zhongguoren' (I am Chinese), *Xiandai pinglun*, 2, no. 33 (July 1925), pp. 136-7.

a racial group which has long been unjustly discriminated against, have unwittingly developed among themselves a defensive mechanism which is influencing their judgements on racial questions. The reviewer recalls with regret that during his students days [in the United States] he had estranged some of his best Jewish friends for his candid views on the point of racial inequality.³⁹

Eugenic ideas, indeed, were also dominant among modernising élites in Republican China. Heredity, descent, sexual hygiene and race became the core themes of medical and eugenic discourses, which thrived on folk ideas of patrilineal descent. In their racialisation of the nation, the discourse of eugenics most clearly endowed the state with a responsibility in the production of a healthy population.⁴⁰ Although eugenics in China never achieved legislative expression, in contrast to other countries like the USA and Germany,⁴¹ ideas of race improvement were eagerly appropriated and spread by the new medical professions. As a *Textbook of civic biology* (1924) for middle schools put it, 'the choice of a partner who is unfit harms society and the future of the race. To establish a strong country, it is necessary to have strong citizens. To have strong and healthy citizens, one cannot but implement eugenics. Eugenics eliminate inferior elements and foster people who are strong and healthy in body and mind.'⁴² Proponents of eugenics claimed that breeding principles such as assortative mating and artificial selection could prevent further degeneration. Although modernising élites were instrumental in putting forward eugenic views, theories of race improvement circulated among a much wider audience in China. Cheap textbooks on heredity

³⁹ Pan Guangdan, review of Donald Young (ed.), *The American Negro* (1928) in *The China Critic*, 28 Aug. 1930, p. 838.

⁴⁰ The following is taken from Frank Dikötter, *Sex, culture and modernity in China: Medical science and the construction of sexual identities in the early Republican period*, London: C. Hurst; Honolulu: Hawaii University Press; Hong Kong University Press, 1995.

⁴¹ D.J. Kevles, *In the name of eugenics: Genetics and the use of human heredity*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985; Michael Burleigh and Wolfgang Wippermann, *The racial state: Germany, 1933-1945*, Cambridge University Press, 1991; Robert N. Proctor, *Racial hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988; Paul J. Weindling, *Health, race and German politics between national unification and Nazism, 1870-1945*, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

⁴² Wang Shoucheng, *Gongmin shengwuxue* (A textbook of civic biology), Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1928 (1st edn 1924), p. 52.

and genetics explained to the public the dangers of racial degeneration. Primers, self-study manuals, pamphlets and 'ABC' introductions to mainline eugenics were published throughout the 1920s. Hereditary principles, granting sex a biological responsibility for future generations, were thought to highlight further the need for social discipline. Mendelian laws were circulated by popular journalists and commercial writers to underline how genetic factors determined the endowment of an individual. Student magazines urged university students to undertake eugenic research for the sake of advancing the 'race', the state, and the individual.⁴³ In the 1930s, eugenic arguments became increasingly common in medical circles, 'degeneration' and 'racial hygiene' being the catchwords of the day. Official marriage guides encouraged 'superior' people to marry for the regeneration of the 'race',⁴⁴ since 'inferior' and 'weak' characteristics were transmitted through sexual congress; a popular guide for women published by the Commercial Press described hereditary diseases as the 'germs' which threatened the nation with degeneration and final extinction (*zhongzu zimie*).⁴⁵ Professor Yi Jiayue, a highly respected member of the academic community, made the forceful statement that 'if we want to strengthen the race, there is no time to waste. We should first implement a eugenic program. Strictly speaking, we should not just forbid the sexually diseased, the morons and the insane to marry. For those who abuse the sexual instinct and create a menace to future generations, there can be only one appropriate law of restraint: castration!'⁴⁶

RACIALISED IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

Racial frames of reference never disappeared from the People's Republic of China, and have generally increased within popular culture, scientific circles and government publications in the Deng

⁴³ Wu Zhenzi, 'Women wei shenme yao yanjiu youshengxue' (Why we should study eugenics), *Xuesheng zazhi*, 15, no. 9 (Sept. 1928), pp. 31-6.

⁴⁴ For instance Ma Chonggan, *Jiehun zhidao* (Marriage guide), Shanghai: Qinfen shuju, 1931, pp. 11-12.

⁴⁵ Zhang Jixiu, *Funü zhuan* (Special handbook for women), Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1937, pp. 52-61.

⁴⁶ Yi Jiayue, 'Zhongguo de xingyu jiaoyu wenti' (The problem of sex education in China), *Jiaoyu zazhi*, 15, no. 8. (Aug. 1923), p. 22160.

Xiaoping era. University students have been the social group most prominently involved in one of the more recent attempts to promote skin colour as a marker of social status. Physical attacks and demonstrations against African students on the university campuses of the People's Republic throughout the 1980s have been the most widely publicised feature of these racialised practices.⁴⁷ Far from being a manifestation of a vestigial form of xenophobia, these events are an intrinsic part of racialised trends of thought which have been diversely deployed in China since the end of the nineteenth 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 politicised oppositions to the state: six months after their mass demonstrations against Africans in Nanjing, students were occupying Tiananmen square in the name of 'democracy'.

Images of foreign sexuality have been important in the racialisation of encounters between African and Chinese students, and have played an even greater role in the spread of collective anxieties about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).⁴⁸ On popular levels, the myth of 'international syphilis' (*guoji meidu*) has contrasted the pure blood of Chinese people to the polluted blood of outsiders, said to have become immune to syphilis after centuries of sexual promiscuity. Official discourse and popular culture have also explained AIDS as an evil from abroad, and prostitutes who offered their service to foreigners were singled out for severe punishment in the late 1980s. This official line of thought elicited a law on the mandatory testing of all foreign residents; African students in particular have been singled out for the AIDS test. From calls for the replacement of modern lavatories by Chinese-style toilets in the West, where excrement on toilet seats is claimed to be the main cause of AIDS, to pseudo-scientific studies of the 'Chinese

⁴⁷ See mini-symposium on 'Racism in China', including Frank Dikötter, 'Racial identities in China: Context and meaning', Barry Sautman, 'Anti-black racism in post-Mao China', Michael J. Sullivan, 'The 1988-89 Nanjing anti-African protests: Racial nationalism or national racism?' in *The China Quarterly*, no. 138 (June 1994), pp. 404-47.

⁴⁸ This section is taken from Frank Dikötter, 'A history of sexually transmitted diseases in China' in Scott Bamber, Milton Lewis and Michael Waugh (eds), *A history of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS in Asia and the Pacific*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997, pp. 67-84.

immune system' (thought to be inherently superior to the damaged bodies of Westerners), dubious theories of cultural and racial superiority articulated by highly prominent voices in the field of medical science have perpetuated a complacent attitude which does little to alert the population to the real dangers of infection. Instead of a virus which can potentially be contracted by every sexually active person, HIV/AIDS is represented as a fair retribution for sexual transgressions which mainly afflicts racial Others. In their racialisation of the disease, many of the publications on STDs produced by government circles and medical institutions carry images of white and black AIDS sufferers; they interpret gay demonstrations in America as a sign of the imminent collapse of 'Western capitalist society'. 'Primitive societies' in Africa are also criticised for their lack of moral fibre, in contrast to the virtues of socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Beyond the popularisation of racial discourse in information pamphlets on STDs, medical circles have also been instrumental in the promotion of a eugenics programme.⁴⁹ On 25 November 1988 the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress of Gansu Province passed the country's first law prohibiting 'mentally retarded people' from having children. Further laws for the improvement of the 'gene pool' have been enforced since June 1995: people with hereditary, venereal or reproductive disorders as well as severe mental illness or infectious diseases (often arbitrarily defined) are mandated to be sterilised, undergo abortions or remain celibate in order to prevent 'inferior births'. As Chen Muhua, Vice-President of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress and President of the Women's Federation, declared a few years ago: 'Eugenics not only affects the success of the state and the prosperity of the race, but also the well-being of the people and social stability.' Although eugenic legislation in itself does not inevitably entail the promotion of racial categories of analysis, since it focuses on the genetic fitness of individuals within a country rather than between population groups, some publications in demography none the less make claims about the 'biological fitness' of the nation and herald the next century as an era to be dominated by 'biological competition' between the 'white

⁴⁹ For a more detailed analysis of eugenics in the PRC, see Frank Dikötter, *Imperfect conception: Medical knowledge, birth defects and eugenics in China*, London: Hurst (forthcoming).

race' and the 'yellow race'. The mastery of reproductive technologies and genetic engineering is seen as crucial in this future battle of the genes, and the government has given much support to medical research in human genetics. A research team was even set up in November 1993 to isolate the quintessentially 'Chinese genes' of the genetic code of human DNA.

Racial discourse, as has been illustrated by student demonstrations against African students, has not been limited to officially sponsored publications. Even opponents to the regime have been eager to deploy racial categories of analysis as a unifying concept against the threat of 'Western culture'. To take but one example, Yuan Hongbing, a lawyer at Beijing University who was detained in February 1994 and has become a well-known figure among dissidents, called for a 'new heroicism' in order to save 'the fate of the race' and for a 'totalitarian' regime which would 'fuse the weak, ignorant and selfish individuals of the race into a powerful whole'. According to Yuan, only purification through blood and fire would provide a solution to China's problems: 'On the battlefield of racial competition the most moving clarion call is the concept of racial superiority.[...] Only the fresh blood of others can prove the strength of one race.'⁵⁰

However, scientists have contributed more than others to the promotion of racial definitions of identity and difference. In their scientisation of folk notions of patrilineage and descent, many have represented Peking Man at Zhoukoudian as the 'ancestor' of the 'mongoloid race'. A great number of hominid teeth, skull fragments and fossil apes have been discovered from different sites scattered over China since 1949, and these finds have been used to support the view that the 'yellow race' today is in a direct line of descent from its hominid ancestor in China. Although palaeoanthropologists in China acknowledge that the evidence from fossil material discovered so far points at Africa as the birthplace of mankind, highly regarded researchers like Jia Lanpo have repeatedly underlined that man's real place of origin should be located in East Asia. Wu Rukang, also one of the most respected palaeoanthropologists in China, has come dangerously close to upholding a polygenist thesis (the idea that mankind has different

⁵⁰ Yuan Hongbing, *Huangyuan feng* (Winds on the plain), Beijing: Xiandai chubanshe, 1990, p. 193, quoted in Geremie Barné, 'To screw foreigners is patriotic: China's avant-garde nationalists', *China Journal*, 34 (July 1995), pp. 229-30.

origins) 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.'⁵¹ Early hominids present in China since the early Middle Pleistocene (1 million years ago) are believed to be the basic stock from which all the national minorities in the PRC have ultimately emerged. Physical anthropologists have also invoked detailed craniological examinations to provide 'irrefutable evidence' about a continuity in development between early hominids and the 'modern mongoloid race',⁵² and detailed studies of prehistoric fossil bones have been carried out to represent the nation's racial past as characterised by the gradual emergence of a Han population into which different minority groups would have merged.⁵³ 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.'⁵⁴

Serological studies of population groups defined as 'races' have also been carried out in the PRC. Mainly initiated by Professor Zhao Tongmao, estimations of genetic distance based on gene frequency are claimed to have established that the racial differences between population groups living within China – including Tibetans, Mongols and Uighurs – are comparatively small. Serologists have also observed that the 'Negroid race' and the 'Caucasian race' are closer related to each other than to the 'yellow

⁵¹ Wu Rukang, *Guren leixue* (Palaeoanthropology), Beijing: Wenwu chubanshe, 1989, pp. 205-6; see also Wu Rukang, *Renlei de qiyan he fazhan* (The origin and evolution of ancient man), Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1980.

⁵² For instance Yang Qun, 'Kaoguxue yu renleixue' (Archaeology and anthropology) in Zhongguo renlei xuehui (eds), *Renleixue yanjiu* (Studies in anthropology), Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 1987, pp. 288-302.

⁵³ See for instance Han Kangxin and Pan Qifeng, 'Gudai Zhongguo renzhong chengfen yanjiu' (Research into the racial composition of ancient China), *Kaogu xuebao*, no. 2 (Feb. 1984).

⁵⁴ John Reader, *Missing links: The hunt for earliest man*, London: Penguin Books, 1990, p. 111.

race'. Zhao Tongmao put the 'Han race' – represented as the core group and ultimate point of reference – at the very centre of his chart, which gradually branched out 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. A more detailed analysis of gene frequencies revealed that the Uighurs might share some traits with Europeans but were ultimately closer to the Han. The author also hypothesised that the genetic differences within the 'yellow race' could be divided into a 'northern' and a 'southern' variation, which might even have different 'origins'. His conclusion underlined that the Han were the main branch of all the different population groups in China and that all the minority groups ultimately belonged to the 'yellow race': the political boundaries of the PRC, in other words, appeared to be founded on clear biological markers of genetic distance.⁵⁵ The political implications of racial discourse for minority groups in the PRC are clear in the government's promotion of China as the 'homeland of the Modern Yellow Race' (see for instance the *Handbook on education in Chineseness* (1990) edited by Wu Jie). Even Outer Mongolia has recently been portrayed as an 'organic and integral part' of the 'Chinese race' in a propaganda book called *The Inside Story of Outer Mongolia's Independence*.⁵⁶

The missing link between ape and man – symbol of the phylogenetic continuity between early hominids and the modern 'yellow race' – has also been claimed to exist in China.⁵⁷ Officially sponsored research into the 'mystery of the wild man' became particularly prominent after the reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978. A string of reports appeared about the 'wild man' (*yeren*) from Shennongjia in Fang county, Hubei province, a place where

⁵⁵ Zhao Tongmao, *Renlei xuexing yichunxue* (Genetics of human blood groups), Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 1987, pp. 351–71; 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), pp. 398–405.

⁵⁶ William 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.

⁵⁷ This section draws on Frank Dikötter, 'Hairy barbarians, furry primates and wild men: Medical science and cultural representations of hair in China' in Alf Hildebeitel and Barbara Miller (eds), *Hair in Asian cultures: Context and change*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1997.

hairy creatures had been sighted since the Ming dynasty. However, where scattered mentions to hairy otherness had sufficed in imperial ideology, materialist philosophy demanded a full investigation. A China 'Wild Man' Research Society was founded in August 1981 with the support of highly regarded scientists such as anthropologist Wu Dingliang (Fudan University), palaeontologist Jia Lanpo (Chinese Academy of Science), biologist Qian Guozhen (Huadong Normal University) and medical expert Fang Zhongyou (Guangxi Hospital). The wild man was represented as the repository of a lost phylogeny, the 'missing link' between the ape and the human. Portrayed as the vessel of evolutionary traits which had disappeared with civilisation, the scientific analysis of the wild man's hair was thought to reveal prehistoric conditions of life. The findings of a tuft of brown hair in 1980 and remains of more than 3,000 'red hairs' of the 'wild man' from Shennongjia were scrutinised. A book entitled *On the trail of the 'wild man'* provided detailed comparisons of hair between apes and the wild man, whereas the Research Unit for Forensic Medicine of the Wuhan Hospital concluded that the wild man's hair was structurally comparable to human hair: 'We infer that the hair from these "wild men" could belong to an as yet unknown higher primate.' Contrasting 'primitiveness' to 'modernity', popular reports about the wild man became rife during the 1980s, such as a daily newspaper's article about a girl abducted by a wild man who later escaped back to 'civilisation' with her two shaggy children; in 1986, the *Science Evening Paper* even brought to the attention of the public a 'wild boy' coated in hair recently discovered near the Himalaya mountains and kept hidden in a military hospital of Shaanxi province as a living fossil.

In contrast to recent efforts made by some other governments, there is no indication that the hierarchies of power maintained through racial discourse are being contested in any significant way by the cultural centres of authority in China. 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.⁵⁸ In Singapore too, racialised identities have been promoted by the government in the official conflation of notions of culture, ethnicity and race.⁵⁹ The desire to consolidate and expand a biologised notion of Chinese identity in mainland China and elsewhere may further be reinforced by the resurgence of overseas networks. Greater China, or the invention of a community that transcends the political boundaries of the People's Republic, can very well be based on the racialisation of 'Chineseness'.

Three conclusions might be drawn from this chapter. First, racialised identities are central, and not peripheral, to notions of identity in China: precisely because of the extreme diversity of religious practices, family structures, spoken languages and regional cultures of population groups that all define themselves as 'Chinese', ideologies of biological descent have emerged as powerful and cohesive forms of identity. Chineseness – in Taiwan, Singapore or mainland China – is primarily defined as a matter of blood and descent: one does not become Chinese like one becomes Swiss or Dutch, since cultural integration (language) or political adoption (passport) are both excluded. Racial discourse, of course, has undergone numerous permutations, reorientations and rearticulations since the end of the nineteenth century. Its flexibility and variability is part of its enduring appeal, as it constantly adapts to different political and social contexts, from the racial ideology of an economically successful city-state like Singapore to the eugenic policies of the communist party in mainland China. It is not suggested here that racialised senses of belonging were the only significant forms of identity available in China. However, it should be underlined that notions of culture, ethnicity and race have consistently been conflated throughout the twentieth century in efforts to portray cultural features as secondary to an imagined biological specificity. Secondly, this chapter has contended that racial discourse thrived largely thanks to, and not in spite of, folk models of identity, based on patrilineal descent

⁵⁸ Bo Yang, 'Zhongzu qishi' (Racial discrimination), *Chouhou de Zhongguoren* (The ugly Chinese), Taipei: Linbai chubanshe, 1985, pp. 212-14.

⁵⁹ Chan Chee Khoo and Chee Heng Leng, 'Singapore 1984: Breeding for Big Brother' in Chan Chee Khoo and Chee Heng Leng, *Designer Genes: I.Q., ideology and biology*, Selangor: INSAN, 1984; John Clammer, 'Sociobiology and the politics of race: "Scientific" knowledge, theories of Chineseness and the management of pluralism in contemporary Singapore', Proceedings of an International Conference on Racial Identities in East Asia held in Hong Kong, 25-26 November 1995.

and common stock. Instead of crude generalisations about the role of 'the state' in the deployment of racial categories which would have been disseminated from top to bottom, or the popular 'cloud to dust' theory of cultural change, a degree of circularity, or reciprocal interaction, between popular culture and officially sponsored discourses of race has been proposed. More stable folk notions of patrilineal descent, which were widespread in late imperial China, were reconfigured from the late nineteenth century onwards. Scientised by cultural intermediaries, indigenous notions of identity were reinforced and enriched by the use of new vocabularies. Moreover, the suggestion that racial narratives inevitably entail a rupture with traditional cultural categories, as is all too common in dominant theories of nationalism, has also been questioned. Thirdly, this chapter has been highly critical of attempts to reduce the complexities of racial discourse in China to so-called 'Western influence'. In contrast to current theories of 'derivation' and 'cultural hegemony', it emphasises how racialised identities have been actively reconstructed and endowed with indigenous meanings that can hardly be explained as 'Westernisation'. Cultural intermediaries in China drew inspiration from foreign cultural repertoires, appropriated the language of science, indigenised notions of 'race', invested new ideas with native meanings, and finally invented their own versions of identity.