

**Racialisation in China**

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**Introduction**

The process of racialisation in various countries throughout the world has been the subject of debate in recent years, and although it is known that racist attitudes continue to be a problem in many societies, it is not uniformly agreed as to the reasons why they occur, that is to say which processes of racialisation take place to lead certain groups to be classified in terms of 'race'. This essay will focus on the processes that have taken place in China to explain the reproduction of 'races' within the country, whilst also looking at how the processes of racialisation in China have manifested themselves, that is to say how different racial groups interact within Chinese society in ways that further determine their racial identity.

Before the processes of racialisation in China are assessed, the first section of the essay will attempt to give an explanation of what is meant by the process of 'racialisation' in society in order that critical assessment can be made of the question of the racialisation that has affected China as a country. This will also look at the use of understanding the processes of racialisation in understanding human interactions within society.

The second part of the essay will give a partial narrative of the origins of ideas surrounding the classification of 'races' in Chinese history, focusing on the fashions and beauty ideals in earlier Chinese society. The origins of the meaning of the term 'yellow' being used in relation to the Chinese will also be examined.

The essay will then attempt to trace certain aspects of how the discourse of race has developed and changed in China throughout the Twentieth Century, taking into account the apparent effect of Western ideas, and assessing the relationship between the development of the understanding of 'social Darwinism' and ideas surrounding the development of scientific racism and Chinese attitudes towards race.

The development of China as a Communist state will also be looked at, examining the relevance of these political developments in terms of in what ways they had an effect on the attitudes of the people of China towards various ethnic minorities and religious groups. The next section will focus on the role of the various cultural and religious groups that exist in China and look at how these groups interact with the dominant 'Han Chinese' in the country. Focus will also be upon the ways in which the various groups have come to be recognised as races over the years, and to what extent they have been integrated into Chinese society in general. The essay will draw upon examples of racist conflict, and political violence, in cultural groups such as the Tibetan people, in order to assess to role of the various cultural and religious groups within society. In looking at the interactions of these minority groups with Chinese society, an understanding might be gained of how ongoing relations between different cultural groups in the country explain the reproduction of certain areas of Chinese society as racial groups.

**Racialisation**

In order to assess the processes of racialisation in China, it will first be necessary to establish what is meant by the term "racialisation" itself. Colin Webster states that: "Racialisation refers to those instances where social relations between people have been structured by attributing meaning to biological and/ or cultural characteristics, as a result of

which individuals may be assigned to a social group – a general category of persons – which is said to reproduce itself biologically and/ or culturally” (Miles, et al., 2003, cited in Webster, 2007: p.3). That is to say, the process refers to the interactions that have been reproduced over time which have led to individuals being categorised into social groups, recognised by society in general. Examining the conditions and interactions that have taken place in China to structure the various ‘races’ will give an understanding of the processes of racialisation within the country.

Although the labelling and structuring of different races has developed over the course of history, it can be said that the categorisation of humans into groups has always been a feature of societies. In relation to the social life before the existence of states, Stevan Harrell states that, “perceptions of difference – of culture, language, territory, kinship, and physiognomy – have been a feature of relationships between human groups as long as there have been societies. It seems clear, from ethnographic as well as historical evidence, that humans, living in one place and associating with a particular group of people, readily and universally classify humanity into selves and others, attributing to the others different ways of doing things, different ways of talking, different places where they ought to be, different relations of kinship and descent, and different looks” (Harrell, 2001: p. 16). He argues however, that these social groups were not, seemingly, originally classified on the basis of what are now understood as various races (2001: p. 16-17) and therefore that the notion of the division of society into groups in terms of an idea of ‘race’ is something that has developed as social life has progressed, and it is these developments that can be examined to give an understanding of the processes of racialisation.

The concept of cultural or social identity is not fixed and constant throughout time, and the birth and development of racial identities are no different. As Kai-wing Chow argues, writing on the subject of the origins of the Han ‘race’: “no collective identities remain constant over time and all are contested, reinvented or abandoned. Group identities are imagined and often grounded in historical narratives, literature and myths. Symbols, objects and narratives are invented and appropriated from indigenous as well as foreign sources to articulate and represent group identities” (Chow, 1997: pp. 35-36).

### **Historical context of Race and Racialisation in China**

In order to understand contemporary concepts of race in China, it is important to look at how the processes of racialisation have developed and how attitudes surrounding the notion of race have changed throughout the course of history, from times when the country was ruled by hereditary dynasties, through to modern-day China.

The following quotation from Frank Dikötter highlights some of the stigma that surrounded the issue of skin colour in early Chinese society, also putting forward the idea that a link existed between the division of society on the basis of social classes and the differentiation of different racial groups from one another. Dikötter states that: “not all Chinese had the privilege of a light complexion. Labourers were called ‘black-headed people’: the label established a symbolic distance between the peasants and the landlord class. Although this term changed in meaning as a result of an official decree in 221 BC, it was associated with a negatively valued dark complexion. According to the *Shuowen* (first century AD), the common people were called black-headed because of their pigmentation. The *Chunqiu* emphasised the black complexion of the peasant, burned swarthy by the sun. Under the Zhou, slaves were called *renli*. *Li* referred to a large cooking utensil stained by smoke and blackened by fire. It was a metaphor for the black faces of the slaves who tilled the fires under the burning sun. It implied contempt and disdain” (1992: pp. 11- 12).

There is evidence to suggest that the process of racialisation based on skin colour was taking place in early Chinese society, as ideas surrounding fashion and image from the time suggest. Dikötter (1992) draws attention to the fact that “whiteness” would have been associated with the ideals of beauty, and that both males and females would aspire towards

a pale complexion and undertake beauty rituals to achieve those ends, such as the application of powder to make their faces appear more pale, amongst other things (Hinsch, 1990, cited in: Dikötter, 1992, p. 11).

This example indicates the process of racialisation having its effect on society in that it shows the categorisation and classification of individuals based in their physical characteristics.

This also ties in with the idea of the term 'yellow' in relation to people of a certain 'race', and the meaning of the concept for the Chinese. It is not certain precisely when the term came into general use in the description of 'racial' characteristics regarding appearances, however it is said to have had positive connotations for the Chinese, relating to ideas of power and beauty. Frank Dikötter states that; "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" (Dikötter, 1997: p. 12).

Another aspect of racial classification associated with appearance that is highlighted by Dikötter is that of racial hierarchy. According to Dikötter, the idea of a hierarchy was introduced, where individuals were seen to have different qualities based on their 'race'. Those who were seen to be 'white' or 'yellow' were associated with superior intelligence and character, whilst those who were perceived as 'black' or 'red' were seen to embody negative characteristics linked with weakness and lower intelligence (Dikötter, 1992: pp. 80-82).

One possible reason for the development of increasing awareness of racial differences would have been the increasing level of contact that those living in China would have had with people of different nationalities as time progressed and advances were made in the field of travel. Indeed, as Dikötter states: "as a result of the increase in maritime activities and contacts with foreigners, the Southern Song (1127-1279) witnessed a heightening of colour-consciousness" (Dikötter, 1992: p. 11). Where distinctions could be made in terms of characteristics such as appearance or language, a sense of racial identity could be developed, as Dikötter again indicates by drawing attention to "a Chinese geography of the early Ming" (1992: p. 11), stating that "people in Malacca have black skin, but some are white: these are Chinese" (Xie, 1981: 67, quoted in: Dikötter, 1992, p. 11).

### **The 'Han' Race**

The predominant 'race' in China today is the Han Chinese. The vast majority of the population of China, that is to say over 90%, is said to be Han (Chow, 1997: p. 34). The Han Chinese includes within it a number of various different dialects and by no means a uniform way of life, although it is said that they share "a sense of belonging to a group which shares more or less the same culture, a history and a vague sense of belonging to the 'yellow race'" (Chow, 1997: p. 34). Although the Han 'race' has deep cultural origins in history, it is argued that its meaning as it exists now only began to take shape in the twentieth century, after the formation of the Chinese Republic in 1911 (Chow, 1997: p. 36) .

Existing alongside the Han people in Chinese society are a number of other cultures and nationalities. These are in the minority, greatly outnumbered by the Han, and include the Mongols, the Manchus, Tatars and Tibetans, and over the years, at various points in history, processes have taken place, both direct and indirect, whereby the groups in China which are in control have attempted to integrate them into the Chinese culture which exists as a majority (Harrell, 1995). At various points during the early twentieth Century, for example, the Nationalist Chinese authorities have made attempts to integrate the Miao culture into mainstream Chinese society, and "rising (Han) Chinese nationalism and claims to modernity were reinforced by invoking traditional views that pointed to the economic backwardness and

presumed moral weakness of minorities” (Diamond, 1995: 106). This demonstrated the process of racialisation whereby attempts were made to create an essentially uniform ‘race’ amongst the Chinese.

Certain aspects of the processes of racialisation occurring in China can also be observed by looking at the relationship of one of the ‘racial’ groups that have interacted with Chinese society for many years, namely the people of the Autonomous region of Mongolia. The Mongolian population have been “well known for the nomadic life that greatly influenced their history, psychological make- up, world view, and cultural patterns” and the developments in the politics of their areas have caused great shifts in the way the population live their lives as well as shaping their cultural “identities”. The interactions and conflicts with different cultural groups over the years (such as the Manchus) has shaped the migration patterns of the population and developed the politics of the population as it exists now (Burjigin et al., 2003: pp. 53-55).

During the period of around the mid to late Twentieth Century, measures were brought in by the authorities to integrate Mongolian students’ education with the target of “a new, unified development of their homeland.” These initiatives involved separating Mongol students into different types of schools according to which was their spoken language, which also focused heavily on the teaching of the socialist ideology of the People’s Republic of China, thereby also creating “visible boundaries between Mongols and Han, and between Mongols from diverse economic areas (Borchigud, 1995: p. 281-284). This shows how, by controlling aspects of social life such as the education system, governments can cause aspects of social life such as language to be reproduced, creating an identity which defines social groups.

Another way in which the various processes of racialisation taking place throughout the course of history in China can be observed is through looking at the way in which, during a number of periods, groups of people who had not originated in China were treated. For example, Edward Schafer points out that, during the Tang Dynasty, laws were adopted by the Chinese authorities to ensure that the cultural practices of the non- native ‘Uighurs’ did not become fully integrated with society in China, prohibiting intermarriage between the Uighur people and the Chinese. Schafer states that “even at the height of the vogue for the exotic, the best course for an alien was to adopt Chinese manners and habits of thought, as indeed many did. Sometimes, however, the government made it impossible to do this” (Schafer, 1963: pp. 22-23). This would have meant that the Uighurs maintained a separate racial identity to the Chinese population, ensuring that their separate cultural practices would continue to be reproduced, maintaining this identity.

### **Process of Racialisation during the Twentieth Century**

Although concepts of the superiority of certain social groups over others, as well as shared ideals of beauty did exist in earlier times, it is argued that the actual idea of sorting humans into specific racial categories did not become a common held idea in China until later. As Chow states; “The Western classification of human groups into different races was introduced into China in the late nineteenth century. Beginning with the 1890s, the idea that the Chinese belonged to the ‘yellow race’ was popularised in missionary schools and publications. Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution was introduced to China when Yan Fu published the translation of Thomas Huxley’s *On Evolution* in 1898. In this translation, the dual meanings of race as lineage and race as type were readily grafted on to the Chinese term *zhong*. The nature of China’s resistance to European encroachment was understood in terms of a social- Darwinian world view. China’s struggle for survival against the European powers was conceptualised as the ‘yellow race’ competing against the ‘white race’” (Chow, 1997: p. 36). These points link the idea that the racialisation of China in this way was partly as a result of Western influence with the idea of the birth of scientific racism as a way of reasoning with racist ideas. The idea of scientific racism, brought about due to advances in biological study by scientists such as Darwin, Spencer and Sumner, cite reasons in the

genetic differences between various races for the belief in 'white' natural superiority (Dennis, 1995). This is relevant when examining the process of racialisation in China because it gives an understanding of the processes of racialisation that developed in the world by demonstrating the reasoning behind the attitudes to different 'races'. Although the basis of scientific racism is important in understanding of the basis of thought for the processes of racialisation in the world, it must be said that the theories were not entirely adopted into Chinese society, where the concept of social Darwinism was largely rejected at this time (Dikötter, 1992: pp. 100-101).

Having said this, the influence of Western ideas on perceptions of the Chinese people on different races can be argued to have a role in shaping the concepts of racialisation in China. According to Dikötter, there was limited awareness of the separation of different nationalities, amongst many of the Chinese people before the nineteenth century, with "only minimal contact with foreign systems of political thought" (1992: p. 91) whereas contact with "Westerners" affected the way they reacted to different nationalities (Dikötter, 1992: p. 91-94).

The later part of the Twentieth Century saw many developments in the way the concept of 'race' was perceived in China. According to Dikötter, after 1949, when the Chinese civil war had ended, and the People's Republic of China had been formed, the official rhetoric of the government, regarding racism, had been modified under the new Communist regime. The authorities declared China to be against the classification of races and for the integration of minorities into society. However, "although the idea of racial exclusiveness became taboo, the underlying notions that had caused it to be expressed did not disappear. The messianic idea of unification (the *datong*, or 'One World' ideal) was now expressed in a phraseology based in the concept of class struggle, whereas the artificial dichotomization between Chinese and Westerners in biological terms of 'race' was merely reformulated in social terms of 'class'" (Dikötter, 1992: p. 191).

Dikötter argues that Maoist nationalism, did still promote the idea of a racial superiority, as although not declared to be in favour of the idea of a superior 'race', Mao Zedong's ideas around Chinese nationalism did have their roots in his supposed perception of a hereditary race. He states that "like most politicians who grew to maturity in Republican China, he perceived the Chinese 'nation' (*minzu*) as a biologically distinct group: being Chinese was a matter of 'culture' as well as 'race'. As a student of Li Dazhao, it is also likely that he coalesced the notions of 'class' and 'race' into a vision of the struggle of the 'coloured people' against 'white imperialism'" (Dikötter, 1992: p. 192).

## Ethnic Minorities

During the course of the twentieth century, there has been much change in the way that the ethnic minorities living in China have been integrated into Chinese society (Mackerras, 1994). According to Colin Mackerras; "the correlation between modernization and integration generally has been strong in China in this period. The process of integration riding on modernization gestated very hesitantly in the first half of the century and [towards the latter half of the twentieth century] took firmer root, but also became tenser and more complex because of a rise in feelings of national identity among the minorities" (1994: p. 260). This suggests that the different processes of racialisation in China on different ethnic groups has given the various ethnic minorities their cultural identities which are separate, although to some extent integrated with, society in China as a whole.

Different governments have, in China, failed "to recognise any but the Manchus, Muslims, Mongols, and Tibetans and minorities. The Miao, Zhuang, Bouyei, Yi, Bai, Koreans, and others were regarded either as branches of the Han or as immigrants. Those which were economically and socially most backward were easily dismissed as 'tribes', which almost by their nature hardly mattered" (Mackerras, 1994: p. 261).



## Religious Groups

Another key aspect of the process of racialisation in China is that of the place of religious groups in society, and how, in some cases, these groups have created their own societies with languages, culture, customs and traditions and therefore, to a certain extent become subjects of the processes of racialisation that occur in society.

An understanding of these processes can be gained by examining the way that religions interact with society.

### Buddhism

The role of Buddhists in China has changed over the years, with anti-Buddhist sentiment being witnessed to be prevalent amongst Chinese authorities over time. For example, around 390 AD, Buddhism was observed by some to be “inferior to Chinese systems because of its foreign origins” (Dikötter, 1992: p. 19).

The divisions between certain groups of Buddhists and Chinese society in general has been highlighted in recent years though the various conflicts and political protests that have taken place between the Chinese and those living in Tibet. An example of this can be observed to have taken place as recently as earlier this year, when, in opposition to Chinese rule the treatment of Tibetan Buddhists by the Chinese authorities, a number of Tibetans undertook ‘self-immolation’ (BBC, 2012). The divisions between these religious groups demonstrate the way in which the processes of racialisation in Chinese society has caused certain groups to live, for one thing ideologically separate lives.

### Anti-Semitism in China

Part of the process of racialisation relates to the idea that, by attributing various characteristics (such as physical or cultural characteristics) to a certain religious group, the fact that others outside that particular group may not identify with those characteristics could lead to a feeling of a distinctive identity between that various groups, and attitudes towards Jewish people in China can demonstrate this idea. As Zhou Xun puts it, in China: “By creating the ‘Jew’ as a homogeneous group, a constitutive outsider embodying all the negative as well as positive qualities which were feared or desired, various social groups in China were able to identify themselves as an integrated reference group – a homogeneous ‘in-group’, or in this case the ‘Chinese’. These groups are able to project their own anxieties on to outsiders like ‘Jews’. The construction of the ‘Jews’ corresponds to a widespread fear of and need for an Other which can be found in many cultures and societies” (Xun, 1997: p. 54).

Xun also argues that the although dynamics between different cultural groups had changed and developed over time due to factors such as intermarriage, the Jewish identity in China has been constructed as a ‘race’ and categorised along with other ‘races’ in part by prominent thinkers such as Liang Qichao towards the beginning of the twentieth century, along with the attribution of, for example, collective physical characteristics. Xun states that: “In 1910, for instance, when Zhang Xiangwen, a historian and geographer, visited the assimilated ‘Jewish’ community in Kaifeng, he perpetuated these stereotypes by claiming that some of the ‘Jewish’ descendants had big noses and deep eyes. He also claimed that one could still distinguish them by their ‘Caucasian’ physical features from genuine Chinese” (Xiangwen, cited in: Xun, 1997: pp. 55- 56). This type of developing awareness of different ‘race’ types, that is to say racialisation of Jewish people, helps to develop understanding of how anti-Semitic ideas could develop in certain environments such as China.

### Muslim population in China

The Muslim population in China, although large by number, is a relative cultural minority when compared other religious and cultural groups in the country (Gladney, 1991). It has been argued that the Muslim population is not entirely integrated within Chinese society as a whole. As Dru C Gladney states: “the minorities, and Muslims, of China have generally been marginalized on the geographic and social horizons of discourse and power in China, often confined to remote, officially closed communities difficult to research and often reluctant to admit outsiders” (Gladney, 1991: vii). Although this statement does not refer to the entire Muslim population in the country as a whole, it does demonstrate the fact that the processes of the racialisation of the Muslim people in China have led to cultural divisions within the society.

### **‘Anti-Black’ Sentiment in China**

In an article looking into the reasoning behind attacks on Chinese and African students, Barry Sautman puts forward the argument that it was the development of a certain degree of racism in certain parts of Chinese society, rather than xenophobia, that caused the conflict between the two groups (1994: p. 435).

Sautman claims that this anti- Black sentiment may political implications for China, stating that: “Chinese elite involvement in expressions of racial hostility suggests that domestic intolerance may also have a role in moulding external affairs. Policy makers may consciously or unconsciously hold racial stereotypes” (Sautman, 1994: p. 413) Taking this into account, it can be seen that anti- Black attitudes observed in China are highly significant in assessing the racialisation of the country.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it has been said that the racialisation of Chinese society cannot be entirely put down to Western influence and migration, as it has been argued that the notion of racial superiority has been present in the country since earlier Chinese society, as well as the idea that certain racial characteristics were considered to be superior, such as a pale complexion, amongst other things. The argument has also been put forward that the classification of races in to hierarchical categories can be traced to relatively early society in China.

The development of the Han Chinese and their dominant position by number in China has been drawn upon to make comparisons with the minorities of China. Various attitudes surrounding the Han Chinese have been looked into, including the idea that the Han Chinese may be considered to be the superior race in the country.

The relationship between the development of theories around scientific racism and its significance in China has also been developed, showing certain aspects of the processes of racialisation here.

It has also been observed throughout the course of the essay that the processes of racialisation as well as their effects have developed throughout the course of history. The changes that took place in China during the country’s transition towards a Communist state are said to have had a great impact on the attitudes of the Chinese in terms of their interactions with ethnic minorities. It has been pointed out that the country under Mao Zedong saw changing attitudes, although the ideas around Chinese Nationalism could have roots in ideas of racial superiority (Dikötter, 1992).

The essay has also looked at the position of ethnic minorities in Chinese society and how the interactions of these groups with society in China help to understand the reproduction of ‘races’ in the country. In a similar way, the role of religious groups in China and the attitudes towards them can give an understanding of how these groups came to be classified as ‘races’.

Taking into account the various aspects of racialisation looked at in this essay, it can be seen that the processes of racialisation within Chinese society are complex and have

developed and changed throughout the country's history, shaping the way that different 'racial' groups are perceived in China today.

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