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# Chinese Whiteness: The Discourse Of Race In Modern And Contemporary Chinese Culture

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**CHINESE WHITENESS:**

**The Discourse of Race in Modern and Contemporary Chinese Culture**

by

**Kirstin Clouser**

A Thesis Submitted to the Honors Council

For Honors in Comparative Humanities

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis chronicles the development of western forms of race and racism in China. It then studies contemporary China using theories derived from whiteness studies in order to explain the unique position that whites (Caucasians) have in China today. In Chapter I, I break down the definition of race and introduce a foundation for a whiteness studies approach to research. In Chapter II, I analyze how Chinese classified themselves and other humans prior to the western system of race. In Chapter III, I chronicle the introduction of western forms of race and racism to China, and the appropriation of these concepts to suit Chinese goals. In Chapter IV, I approach cultural phenomenon in contemporary China by situating them in their historical traditions as well as by approaching them as displaying an internalized racism and white privilege. Finally in the Conclusion, I postulate on what China's contemporary racial system means for China.

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## INTRODUCTION

Don't be surprised if you get a fair amount of stares, or even photo requests.

When I was traveling in China, it was not uncommon for Asian tourists to ask people in my group who were very pale, blond-haired, and/or very tall to pose for photos with them (Williams).

The Ministry of Public Security must clean out the foreign trash: catch foreign lowlifes and protect innocent girls (Wudaokou and Sanlitun are the worst-affected areas). Eliminate foreign human traffickers, unemployed Americans and Europeans who come to China to make money by selling people abroad, misleading the public and encouraging them to emigrate. Learn to recognize the foreign spies who find a Chinese girl to shack up with while they make a living compiling intelligence reports, posing as tourists in order to do mapping surveys and improve GPS data for Japan, South Korea, the United States and Europe... (Yang Rui,).

White people who travel and live in China exist in a confusing, paradoxical racial space. They exist in an objectified space—signifiers of foreignness—and potential bearers of every characteristic that foreignness represents. At once they are the wealthy businessman, the powerful invader, the sexual entity, and the fool ignorant of Chinese culture. One thing all of these identities have in common though is that of the “other”.

Even if they are solely citizens of the People's Republic of China, whites are never allowed to identify as "Chinese". They occupy an otherness in China that is revered, hated and feared all at once.

In this thesis I will be using the lenses of whiteness and white privilege to analyze concepts of race in China. One issue with using these particular lenses is that the common definition of whiteness and white privilege is derivative of the United State's racial system. China has developed a separate race schema from the schemas more commonly studied in the United States and Europe. China also defies post-colonialist theories of race, due to its semi-colonized state. It is truly unique. "...[Whatever is] specific about one country's historical experience and the ways the fiction of 'race' are managed collectively. The meanings attached to 'race' are always time-and place-specific, part of each national racial regime. Whiteness is no exception" (Garner 1). There are many dimensions of white privilege that do not extend to China. For example, whiteness does not lend to invisibility in China. When a white westerner travels to China, they become startled into seeing their own racial identity, but this particular racial identity and the privileges and stereotypes that go along with it are unique to China. Thus I must approach this problem by first breaking down the development of concepts of race and whiteness in China. I argue that the Chinese version of race was introduced in the Qing Dynasty and was solidified in the Republican period. This period introduces three things that make racism distinct from other social constructions: liberalism, biological science and capitalism. The second period I discuss extends from 1980—with Deng Xiaoping's so-called "Economic Reforms and Openness" (Ch. *gaige kaifang* 改革开放)—to the



present, in which a rapid introduction to the international system as well as a lack of a clear discourse on race led to internalized forms of western racism and the white privilege that goes along with it. These two periods created two narratives of whiteness that are combined in the form of Chinese nationalism today.

The purpose of this thesis is to bring two types of analysis together in order to better understand the current state of “whiteness” in China. In Part I, I chronicle the introduction and appropriation of western concepts of race in China. In Part II, I explore the modern western concept of white privilege that China has gradually adopted since it re-emerged onto the international stage in the 1980s. Here I examine Wei Hui’s novel *Shanghai Baby*, as well as relevant aspects of contemporary Chinese television. In the Conclusion, I make conjectures regarding the future relations of a “Post-racial America” with a China ignorant of its own racial biases towards whites.

Why is this thesis important, both to general scholarship as well as to my particular fields of comparative humanities and East Asian studies? In the past few decades there has been an increasing amount of work on race studies and its oppressive force within American and western institutions. There has also been a fair amount of scholarship about the increase of Chinese nationalism in recent years. What this scholarship is missing, however, is a comprehensive outlook on Chinese perceptions of “Chineseness” as informed by race—and, somewhat surprisingly, by conceptions of whiteness. People who go to China are often shocked by the deep-seated racial stereotypes and prejudices already present in a country that by westerners is frequently seen to be populated by only one race. Instead of casual ignorance, blacks go up against

centuries of ingrained prejudice, being told by Chinese that they are an inferior race and that their skin color is undesirable. Yang Rui, the host of *Dialogue* on CCTV news, says, “[we] should reflect on our own shortcomings. Many Chinese people are seriously racist: they look down on themselves and have a sense of inferiority; they bow and scrape before white people while being more than a little dismissive of colored peoples” (O’Kane, np). There have been studies done on ideas of race in China before European involvement as well on the introduction of the western sociological concept of race to China. There has been little, if any, attempt however to explain the odd combination of racial narratives in China concerning whites. I combine the idea of a racial Chinese identity created in the early twentieth century with the overwhelming white privilege in the international system that China is reintroduced.

“The scholarship on whiteness in the United States has highlighted several important characteristics of white racial identity: It is often invisible or taken for granted, it is rooted in social and economic privilege, and its meaning and import are highly situational” (McDermott 247). Whites in the west often consider themselves part of a universal breed of humanity. Due to their special power position, they have not found themselves hindered by racial identity often and thus have been able to forget the racial paradigms they have helped to create.

In reality we are unable to remove racial identity from affecting our status in the institutions of power both in the United States and the larger world. A new approach to identity is the intersectional approach, which concentrates on four main areas of identity: race, gender, sexuality, and class. Each of these identities connects in different ways to

create different types of privileges and forms of discrimination. In the United States of America, the dominant power position is that of the heterosexual, affluent, white male. In this study however, I will be solely focusing on white racial identity in China, though this identity is also determined by other levels such as gender, and thus difficult to distill into its own set of privileges and disadvantages. I recognize that the white racial identity I analyze in China is primarily that of a white man, and this is done partially because white men have a more public position in China, but it is primarily to make this thesis a reasonable size. Regardless, understanding white racial identity in China is essential to understanding China and how it relates to other nations.

[Race] as a global structure of privilege and subordination, normative entitlement and normative exclusion, is inextricably tied up with the development of [...] modern societies...whether in the colonized world or the colonizing mother countries” (Mills 1388).

Racism can never be destroyed if it continues to go unaddressed.

## **Chapter I**

### **Race and White Privilege**

#### **Race, A Definition**

I have been using the term “white” somewhat casually in describing my thesis topic, but this is not in fact a concrete classification. This identity did not always exist. In fact whiteness is a rather difficult identity to pin down. What then, is “whiteness”? Why are some people regarded as white, and what does this identity entail? Whiteness is ultimately a racial identity. Let us first explore the boundaries of race and debunk a few common misperceptions before moving to a discussion of the privileges the system awards those who occupy the white racial identity.

Race is not a permanent identity. Dr. Ian F. Hanley Lopez, a law professor at Berkley, defines race as:

a vast group of people loosely bound together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their morphology and/or ancestry. I argue that race must be understood as a sui generis social phenomenon in which contested systems of meaning serve as the connections between physical features, races, and personal

characteristics. In other words, social meanings connect our faces to our souls. Race is neither an essence nor an illusion, but rather an ongoing, contradictory, self-reinforcing process subject to the macro forces of social and political struggle and the micro effects of daily decisions. . . [R]eferents of terms like Black, White, Asian, and Latino are social groups, not genetically distinct branches of humankind. (Lopez, np)

Race differentiates people based on a wide array of characteristics, including but not limited to color or shade of skin, shared vernacular, shared cultural values, and so on. It is a social construction with its own systems of meaning and valuation; it is not a permanent biological construction, as it is so often mistaken to be. Different phenotypes have been accepted and rejected from racial classifications over time and space. For example, the definition of blackness in the United States has altered quite a few times, both in the physical attributes a black person is believed to possess and in what the possession of these traits mean for one's position in society. In antebellum America, the definition of blackness was changed as an result of the emancipation of slaves and the response of white supremacy movements. Because blackness could not have the same social meaning anymore (i.e., indicating "inhuman" status), white legislators redefined the boundaries of blackness, thus extending oppression in more subtle ways. Until 1924 in Virginia, a person with up to one-fourth African ancestry was considered legally white. Under the Racial Integrity Act of 1924 however, a new "hypodescent" was established. In societies that have racial hierarchies, hypodescent refers to "the automatic assignment of children

of a mixed union or mating between members of different socioeconomic groups or ethnic groups to the subordinate group” (Kottak 238). This one-drop rule classified all people of mixed African heritage as blacks, thus increasing the accepted group of people over which “pure whites” could maintain social advantage. In short, the emancipation of slaves led to a redefinition of blackness, including the social position blackness gave a person. In response, ruling whites were able to redefine the status of blacks as “free citizens,” so as to better fit their purpose of white supremacy. After the Civil War up to the enactment of the Voting Rights Act, the south enacted a number of Jim Crow laws; i.e., legislation passed to limit the freedoms of the black free men and women. This redefined blackness once again, as a new form of inferior social position. We have determined that racial identities lower in the hierarchy can be changed by the race in the upper echelon of power, namely whites. But is the definition of whiteness not also subject to the influences of time and space?

### **The Changing Face of Race**

The definition of what it means to be white has also changed through the years in the United States. One example of the definition of whiteness widening is in the story of Irish-Americans gaining the social status associated with whiteness. Before the Civil War, Irish-Americans occupied a similar space as northern blacks. They worked the same jobs; they lived in the same areas. In fact “the Irish were often referred to as ‘Negroes turned inside out and Negroes as smoked Irish’” (McDonald np). Here the connections between

race and socioeconomic status become obvious. Irish-Americans were not considered white because they occupied a lower socioeconomic status, the same status as blacks, and thus did not have the privilege of whiteness. Another dimension of the Irish-Americans' lack of belonging was their religion. The Irish realized that if they were to be accepted into a position of power in America, they had to ensure that blacks remained in a position of inferiority. "Once the Irish secured themselves in those jobs, they made sure blacks were kept out. They realized that as long as they continued to work alongside blacks, they would be considered no different. Later, as Irish became prominent in the labor movement, African Americans were excluded from participation" (McDonald, np). When the space they occupied became separated from the same economic and physical space occupied by blacks, they were able to begin the institutional process of gaining the privileges of being white. . . Of course, the complete dehumanization of blacks in the institution of slavery has never been recovered from. Blacks in the United States have never been able to "become white"; In other words they have never been able to have access to the same privileges whites do. "Whiteness as an identity exists only in so far as other racialised identities, such as blackness, Asianness, and so on, exist" (Garner 2). In the case of the Irish, the definition of whiteness expanded when they were able to make a distinction between themselves and blacks. As is clear, both race in general and whiteness in particular are social constructions—albeit powerful ones. In recent years, there has developed a scholarship in America that claims whiteness as both a socialized racial identity as well as a systematic privilege. This scholarship is called whiteness studies or whiteness theory.

## **Dimensions of White Privilege**

Whiteness is a social identity that results in material differences as well as other advantages whites receive from the system. These advantages are called white privilege or white supremacy. Mills classifies six different dimensions of white supremacy:

1. Juridico-political: the state;
2. Economic: access to and accumulation of wealth;
3. Cultural: the culture of people of color is minimized so that whites become the only people capable of culture;
4. Cognitive-evaluative: white privilege is “characteristic and pervasive patterns of not-seeing and not-knowing” (Mills 46), so that the white racial experience is considered to be the norm;
5. Somatic: the valuing of white bodily characteristic over people of color’s characteristics;
6. Metaphysical: “People of color have always recognised that racial subordination is predicated on regarding them as less than fully human, as subpersons rather than persons. A social theory whose implicit ontology fails to register this reality is getting things wrong at a foundational level” (Mills 48).



The first dimension, “juridico-political” as an element of white privilege in the United States becomes obvious when turning one’s gaze upon law enforcement in the United States, in particular the intersection between the drug war, the prison-industrial complex and race. From the beginning the War on Drugs has targeted blacks. Crack, a typically “black” drug had a much harsher sentence than powder cocaine, a typically “white” drug, despite the fact that it is essentially the same drug. More recently the drug war has become a war on marijuana, which has become specifically a war against minorities possessing marijuana. Law enforcement stops people of color for drug searches more often than whites. “Whereas blacks comprised 26% of NYC’s population, they accounted for 51% of all stops. Hispanics comprised 24% of the population but accounted for 33% of all stops. In strong contrast, whites comprised 43% of the population and yet accounted for only 13% of all stops” (Golub, np). Some people claim that this is because people of color are more likely to do drugs. This is false. People of color are simply more likely to get caught. In a National Institute of Health experiment on “Race/Ethnicity and Gender Differences in Drug Use and Abuse Among College Students” it was found that “the racial differences in drug use were similar for undergraduate men. For example, 12-month rates of illicit drug use were 45.1% for Hispanic men, 41.5% for White men, 22.8% for Asian men, 34.1% for African American men and 28.3% for men from other racial categories ( $p < .01$ )”. In the United States whites are just as likely if not more likely to be doing drugs as people of color are. The law system gives whites more liberties in breaking the law. Whites exist in a privileged, untouchable space within the juridical system.

Whiteness is also associated with high socioeconomic status. Of course this has some basis in truth relatively (though Asians in fact have a higher socio-economic status than whites). According to the United States Census Bureau, in 2009 the median income of the white male in the US was \$33,748, while the median income of the black male in the US was \$23,748, a full \$10,000 less. This does not mean of course, that all whites are wealthy and that all blacks are poor. What this does however is create the expectation of a higher class to go along with whiteness, and this is a privilege that whites can “cash in” for more help in getting loans, allowance into spaces more commonly inhabited by the wealthy, and so on. This economic white privilege is not limited to the US national economy—these privileges extend to the international field. Possessing whiteness opens up economic avenues for an individual/nation. “These macro-level relations include those involving international capital, the movement of labour, military, and industrial technology, the allocation of funds and resources throughout and between national societies” (Garner 15). Whiteness intersects with high socioeconomic status to create new levels of power and privilege.

Whites also create the framework for discussing culture. This has a long history. “In most parts of the developed world this involves white people racialising other as less civilized, less appropriate for membership or access to their nation, neighborhood, etc” (Garner). What is referred to “higher” art is still a field dominated by white works and tastes. Non-white arts are still relegated to an inferior position.

Why is this? Why is culture that is non-white given a position of otherness? This is due to the cognitive-evaluative dimension of white supremacy—the liberal ideology of

white invisibility. Whiteness is the place of judgment. It is most often whites who make decisions about what is good and what is bad. Richard Dyer explains the mentality of universality saying, “whites are not of a certain race, they are just the human race” (Dyer, 3). Whites often see themselves as individuals, rather than part of a collective race. They believe that they are individuals that share a universal experience. It is unconsciously believed that being a person of color merely deviates from this universal experience, but whites still live out the basic normative experience. It is not so much that whiteness is invisible, but that due to whiteness, obstacles are removed. There is a lack of obstacles that whiteness provides, and that lack of obstacles is considered the normative experience.

So, to clarify, the argument is not that whiteness is actually invisible. A better word would be 'unmarked'. Whiteness for the majority of 'white' people is so unmarked that in their eyes, it does not actually function as a racial or ethnic identity, at least outside of particular contexts when they might perceive themselves to be in a minority. Whiteness is rendered invisible under the weight of accumulated privileges. (Garner 34)

Whites have difficulty identifying a white culture, but find it easy to identify things that distinguish black or Asian culture from the “normal” culture. As a result of this invisibility, whites often assert a color-blind ideology upon the world. It is because they are unable to see how color affects them, and the privileges it gives them, that they are unable to see how color affects the system they operate in. They do not see how their

white culture gives them the cultural capital to deal with a world whose institutions are steeped in white cultural values:

In its most basic terms, cultural capital is an acquired set of values, beliefs, norms, attitudes, experiences and so forth that equip people differentially for their life in society. As certain types of such capital facilitate access to the higher echelons of the education system and therefore confer privileged access to higher-paying employment, this capital can be “cashed in” for material goods. Bourdieu argues that the dominant (upper middle-class) culture reproduces its dominance by rewarding children in the education system who speak its language, and share its assumptions and aspirations. The greater one’s cultural capital, the more one is conversant with ruling-class culture’s norms. (Garner 49)

This cultural capital could refer to a “white vernacular,” white traditions of interacting, and so on. Whites do not realize that their whiteness essentially privileges them by way of the cultural capital they acquire.

Not only are whites given cultural capital, but they are given preference in the somatic realm as well. Often in the case of beauty, race intersects with sex. Since women are the more commonly objectified sex, their image is subjected to particularly strict levels of racial bias. The preference given to white beauty comes in many forms. It comes with the beliefs that, for instance, black women’s naturally curly hair should be straight, Asian women’s eyes should be larger, and Hispanic women should be less curvy. One of

these levels is colorism which is access to the system of privilege based on skin tone. It is a particularly insidious form of internalized oppression that causes people of color to think that light skin is considered more desirable. This preference for lighter skin is tied directly to racial stereotyping and discrimination:

Maddox and Gray carried out research to examine the role that skin tone plays in the perception and representation of Africans Americans. They found that both blacks and whites perceived a cultural distinction between light and dark skinned blacks. In both groups, negative stereotypes of blacks were associated with those with dark skin, including aggressiveness, lack of intelligence, and lack of education. Dark skin was also associated with poverty and unattractiveness (Garner).

Physical traits are given value both in the aesthetic sense and in the perceived personality traits that accompany them. Once again, whiteness is given the advantage.

Finally there is the metaphysical dimension of white supremacy, which comes from the historical discourse of race and racism. People that are non-white often are considered subhuman in some fashion. This is due to the fact that whites have always had ownership of their own body. They have never been slave, deprived of human status. They have never been one fifth of a person. Due to this history, as well as the history of colonialism, people of color have been relegated to subhuman status.

## Chapter II

### Chinese Identity Pre-race

#### “Chinese” Whiteness Prior to the Introduction of Western Concepts of Race

China’s borders have not always stretched from Beijing to Kunming and from Lhasa to Urumqi. What constitutes China has changed greatly in geography as well as demographics over the past few thousand years. So how can one define what it means to be Chinese? What is “China”? It is not a country like the United States, which can trace its history back only a few centuries. Here I define China’s history as the history experienced by the people, in particular the “Han” people, living primarily in the eastern part of what is now China. Since there was no concept of one China stretching back into history, how did the people of antiquity identify themselves in relation to a larger community, their leaders, and the land in which they lived (which we will label Chinese for efficiency sake)<sup>1</sup>? Chinese have had a longstanding *hua-yi* discourse that explores this matter. *Hua* 华 is everything within China. In fact *hua* is part of one of the former names of China, *Zhonghua* 中华. *Yi* 裔 implies the foreign; the non-Chinese. Sophia Lai of

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<sup>1</sup> The people of antiquity referred to here does not refer to “common” people. Since it is so far in the past the only sources we can use are textual sources, and it was only the most privileged people that had the luxury to learn how to read and write. Thus I refer to the upper class of this period.

Grand Valley State University uses the *Book of Rites*, traditionally attributed to Confucius, to deconstruct what separates the Chinese from the non-Chinese:

The *si yi* (four *yi*) were later ethnographically described and classified according to the four cardinal directions in the “Royal Regulations” (*Wang zhi*) chapter of the *Liji* (Book of Rites) during the Han dynasty. The “Royal Regulations” presented four fundamental Confucian views of China's peripheral others: (1) geography conditioned “bodily capacities,” not mental or intellectual capacities; (2) tattoos, hair, clothing and food are signs of demarcation; (3) cultural diversity and preferences are natural; and (4) communication with other cultural groups can be achieved through translation. (Lai 329)

“Bodily capabilities” also referred to physical looks. Shared physical features became an indicator of inclusion into the Chinese identity. One of the most important differentiating factors was skin color, a central component of today’s racial construction. Skin color is often used as a physical marker of difference, a delimitation of “us” versus “them”. The demarcations between different skin colors as well as the values given to each group changes based on place and time, but the identifier remains. And as the “us” gets acquainted with more and more “them”, the idea of “us” gets even more specific and solid.

The Chinese made the distinction between white and black early on. Today, Chinese are referred to as members of the Yellow race, or 黄族人. This classification of color did not always exist. The early Chinese did not consider their skin to be yellow. In

fact, those considered Chinese at the time took particular pride in their whiteness. “The early Chinese, like their contemporary and certainly later European counterparts, had from ancient times regarded the fairness of skin that approaches ‘whiteness’ as typifying physical beauty, refinement, and intelligence” (Kowner 311). The *Shijing* 诗经 or *Book of Odes*, which dates back to tenth to seventh century BCE, became a “classic” during the Han adoption of Confucianism as the primary Chinese moral narrative. Within it the beauty of a princess is described thusly:

Her fingers were like the blades of the young white grass;

Her skin was like congealed ointment;

Her neck was like the tree-grub;

Her teeth were like melon-seeds;

Her head cicada-like;

Her eyebrows the silkworm moth

(“Continuities and Permutations” 10)

The “young white grass,” “tree-grub,” “melon-seeds” and “silkworm moth” are used as positive signs to which a woman could be linked to in metaphor. In the contemporary west we would not expect being likened to an insect to be a compliment, but in this particular case all of these terms have one thing in common. They are white. In every aspect of her description her whiteness is lauded. Thus the epitome of female beauty is whiteness. The epitome of male beauty was also whiteness. By the Tang dynasty (619–



907 CE), in order to achieve the ideal beauty “at court, male nobles even used powder to whiten their faces” (“Continuities and Permutations” 11). This “whiteness” however was not originally tied directly to racial or ethnic distinctions, but may have emerged rather from class distinctions. Laborers who worked in the sun all day were called black and dark. Although differentiation by skin color in this case is not directly related to the modern concept of race, it creates a framework of color valuation through which valuation of races became possible.

Whiteness was associated with positive values and being Chinese. Conversely, blackness was associated with negative values and foreignness. It is not the blackness that is associated with African descent today, but a relative blackness. Those with skin darker than the Chinese were “black.” “Black symbolized the most remote part of the geographically known world... The Khmers were also called kunlun people, by reference to a mythical mountain appearing in the *Shanhaijing*. The Kunlun Mountain delimited the western edge of the world. As geographical knowledge progressed, the location of the *kunlun* people shifted” (“Continuities and Permutations” 12). The *History of the Jin Dynasty* chronicles the years 265 to 320 BCE. Many stories touched upon the life of the future Empress Xiao Wu.

When she first entered the palace as a concubine, the future Empress li of Jin used to work in the weaving workshop. Given that she was tall in stature and her complexion was dark, the [other] concubines called her “Kunlun.” Alarmed by this, the ministers referred to her [instead] as ‘precious.’ (Fang 314)

As early as the Jin Dynasty, foreign, dark skin and bad started being associated with each other. The equation of 'black' with 'slave,' an important factor in the development of racial discrimination, was thus realized at a relatively early stage in China. The attitude towards *Kunlun* or those with darker skin as associated with slavery is evident in the poem *Kunlun Slaves* by Zhang Ji (ca. 765 – ca. 830). Even before the west had solidified its own complicated system of race, the Arabic-dominated slave trade had already added to the Chinese perception of blackness as meaning lesser.

It is evident through the works of Fei Xin of the late fourteenth century that Chinese identity by this point was deeply wrapped up in whiteness. The populations in Southeast Asia that had qualities of whiteness were assumed to be of a common lineage with the Chinese:

Fei Xin (1388-1436?)... accompanied the famed eunuch commander Zheng He (1371-1435) on four or his seven unprecedentedly extensive naval expeditions undertaken during the first third of the fifteenth century. When commenting on the natives of the nearby South China Sea island state of Melaka... Fei Xin offers the candid assessment - based on his firsthand exposure - that the 'flesh of their bodies is lacquer-black, though there are those among them who, being descended from the Chinese stock of Tang times, are white' (Wyatt 324).

Whiteness meant Chineseness. The Mongol rule of the Yuan period (1279-1368) introduced an institutionalized system in China that ranked the different ethnic groups based on which group was integrated into the Mongol empire at an earlier date. The people of the Yuan dynasty were ranked as follows: 1) Mongols, 2) Semu 色目 and 3) Uighurs, Tibetans and other Central Asians.

To be “Chinese” one did not only have certain phenotypes that reflected whiteness, one also had to have the correct “ethnicity.” In 1644, a separate group of people, the Manchus from the north succeeded in their conquest of China. A Manchu emperor took the throne. These foreigners were not accepted by the Chinese south. It took until 1682 to conquer the last stronghold of the southern Chinese, the province of Yunnan. Why was this Manchu rule so desperately fought? One man known for his anti-Manchu acts was Gu Yanwu (1613–1682). He refused Manchu rule because “[he] refuted the idea that barbarians could be morally transformed and emphasized the sense of shame in serving a barbarian ruler” (“Continuities and Permutations” 25). Gu Yanwu equated the ability to have culture with a Chinese identity, therefore asserting that culture was not something that could be learned, but something that one had to be born with. Specifically those born of the Han ethnic group could be the only ones to uphold the morality inherent to the Chinese culture.

One must remember that although whiteness was considered good, the racial group associated with whiteness today was not associated with whiteness at the time. The positive connotations of whiteness were associated with the Chinese. Even though Caucasians were called white, they were ultimately still foreign. They did not share the

genetic history with the Chinese that was necessary in order for the Chinese to accept a people as civilized.

“The Chinese call the barbarians ‘devils,’ and differentiate them according to their skin color,” wrote Xu Shidong (1814-73) in the 1840s. There were “white devils” (*baigu*) and ‘black devils’ (*heigui*), presumably the Indian Sepoy troops in the service of the British. “The White ones are cold and dull as the ashes of frogs, the black ones are ugly and dirty as coal,” explained Jin He (1819-85). White ash and black coal, both were the teratological products of death, two facets of the same unreality: the foreign demon. Social position distinguished whites from blacks: “Black devils are slaves, white devils are rulers,” commented one perceptive author. (“Discourse of Race in Modern China” 38)

Caucasians were still foreign, just as blacks were, and here we demonstrate a foreignness classified by skin color.

Thus in the nineteenth century, before Europe shamed China in the Opium Wars, there already existed a sort of racial system. It was rather simple compared to the complex system of oppression that evolved in the Americas but it was similar in three main ways: 1) whiteness was privileged; 2) concepts of blackness were negative and associated with slavery; 3) the phenotype claimed to be the most beautiful was the same phenotype found in the people who created the value system. In the late nineteenth century the dominant belief system about the hierarchy of peoples was falling apart in China, mainly due to their victimization at the hands of Europe during the Opium Wars.

As the dominant belief system fell apart the Chinese began to look for another system to fill the whole. The system of race that Europe exported to China in the late nineteenth century battled with earlier conceptions of physical identity in China, and ultimately China synthesized a new system under which it could operate. It was under this system that the Chinese lost their whiteness, and all of the privileges that went along with it.

### **The Transformation of the Hua-Yi Discourse in China**

The shaping of what was Chinese was a process of conscious decisions throughout China's history—distinctions between “us” and “them” were meticulously discussed by philosophers and rulers alike. This tradition of binary differentiation in China is called the *hua-yi* discourse. *Hua* 华 is that which is associated with China, while *yi* 夷 can be translated in various ways, ranging from foreigner and non-Chinese to stranger and barbarian.

Before the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) what defined the *yi* was a mix of appearance and culture. What was *yi* was negative. What was *hua* was positive. Chen An (ca. 860) wrote about how to differentiate the *yi* and the *hua* in his treatise *Hua xin*:

Indeed, the differentiation between *hua* and *yi* depends on *xin* [mind or heart].

Discerning one's *xin* relies on observing one's inclination. There are those born in the Middle Continent [*jiuzhou*], whose conduct violates *li* [rites or propriety] and *yi* [righteousness]. This is *hua* in form but *yi* [barbarian] in mind/heart. [There

are] those born in the *yi* [barbarian] region, but who behave according to *li* [principle] and *yi* [righteousness]. This is *yi* [barbarian] in form but *hua* in mind/heart.

Chen An describes China as the true place of culture. It may be able to civilize the barbarian and change his inside by giving him their culture, their morality, their *li*. Perhaps they can have a stronger connection to *hua* than those who look *hua* but do not act according to its principles. However, it is clear through this that there are classifications made based on geography and appearance. People born outside China may be able to become more Chinese, but they will always be fighting the obstacle of their physicality.

When the Manchus conquered the area traditionally regarded as China and set up the Qing Empire, the literati were originally distressed, considering it the destruction of Chinese civilization. The *hua* would be no more. The ruling Qing government was aware of the traditional *hua-yi* binary, and decided to actively change that binary in order to support their rule. Emperor Kangxi and Yongzheng paid scholars to reinterpret the *Chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals), traditionally attributed to Confucius. This propaganda put emphasis on the idea of honoring the king and de-emphasized the idea of subduing the *yi*. They also put forth the idea that the difference between the *hua* and the *yi* was solely that of culture, not that of geography or appearance. By doing this they were able to combine the Manchu and Han identities into a Manchu-han “one body” identity. The *hua* identity also stretched to other parts of the Qing empire. *Yi* was now used for

labeling foreigners outside the Qing empire's territorial boundaries. In 1787 Emperor Qianlong (1711–1799) responded to the Shaanxi governor Bayansan's use of *yishi* (barbarian mission) when referring to Tibetans: “Because Tibet has long been incorporated into our territory, it is completely different from Russia, which submits to our country in name only. Thus, we cannot consider the Tibetans foreign barbarians, unlike the Russians” (Lai 339). Thus the definition of the *hua* was expanded.

In the nineteenth century the *hua-yi* discourse changed dramatically. Defeat at the hands of westerners forced China to reexamine what exactly the *yi* meant. To address the current chaos of China's identity crisis, great thinkers reinterpreted traditional theories to fit the China of the day. One of the theories used was The Three Ages (*sanshi*) theory was created by the Han dynasty scholar Dong Zhongshu (179–104 BCE). In his interpretation of the *Gongyang Commentary of the Chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals), he proposed that the division of twelve generations of dukes in the Spring and Autumn Annals into three ranks could be translated “into a political theory of historical evolution throughout three ages. This Three Ages theory was later further developed by He Xiu (129–182 CE) in his *Chunqiu gongyang jiegou* (Annotation of Gongyang *Chunqiu*) into an evolution of the world from an age of chaos, through an age of rising peace to a final age of universal peace” (Lai 338). China in the nineteenth century was in a state of chaos. Scholars wanted to figure out how to move to the next stage.

Gong Zizhen (1792–1841), a Han subject under the ruling Manchu Qing, decided to reconceive the relationship between *hua* and *yi*. By proposing “a bin bin [respect for the guest] paradigm for ideal government. He suggested that each ruling house may

benefit from ‘guests’ in the sense of the outsiders or survivors of other ruling houses who are the torch-bearers of the true Dao and the arts of civilization” (Lai 340). In order to reach the *taiping* age (the stage of universal peace in the Three Ages theory), Gong decided that there must be mutual respect between the guest and the teacher. Then when the *taiping* age is reached “the boundary between inside and outside disappears” (Lai 341). Through his writings, Gong Zizhen began to change the binary nature of the *hua-yi* discourse. *Yi* still had the definition of being outside Confucian norms as well as its negative connotation of being uncivilized. What changed however was how the character was used. Instead of being used stand alone it is now paired with other characters like *xiyi* or *yangyi*. There is no longer just the *yi*. The *yi* now has classifications within its category.

This differentiation within the *yi* allowed for a new proposal by Wei Yuan (1794-1857). In *Haiguo tuzhi*, Wei writes:

What is the purpose of the present work? Its purpose is to show how to use *yi* to fight *yi* [*yi-yi gong yi*], how to make the *yi* pacify one another [*yi-yi khan-yi*] [to our advantage], and how to learn the good practices of the *yi* in order to bring the *yi* under control [*shi yi changji yi zhi yi*]. (Liu 209–10)

Wei recognized multiple groups of *yi*. *Hua* was no longer the sole exporter of good culture. Some of the *yi* had positive cultural elements that Wei believed China could use to advance itself. China needed to learn from the *yi* in order to transform itself into a more powerful country. Here we see race begin to enter the *hua-yi* discourse. One way in



which Wei begins to differentiate between the *yi* is race. In *Haiguo Tuzhi*, he lifts an entire section from *A Study of Geography* (1847) by Portuguese diplomat and translator Jose Martinho Marques (1810–1867), which covers “the world's five racial categories [*zhong*] according to skin colors and physical features” as well as other topics.

Finally, Feng Guifen (1809–1874) was a scholar who believed that for China to self-strengthen, in addition to Neo-Confucian values, western military technology was essential. *Yi*, for Feng, “referred less to uncivilized and insensitive people without culture but rather signified the people and countries in Europe and North America that, in a way, had to be envied” (Lai 345). Thus *yi* went through the final shift of transforming from a singular less civilized crowd, to a large category containing different variations, some of which were better than China. This differed greatly from the original impression of whites as uncivilized animals. Whites were now considered to have valuable cultural elements that were superior to some Chinese elements.

### **The Process of Becoming Yellow**

Originally, Europeans reinforced the Chinese belief in their own whiteness. “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’” (“Continuities and Permutations” 12). The Europeans supported the conception of the Chinese as white due to two factors: skin tone and presumed level of civilization. Due to their whiteness, Europeans supposed that Chinese would be able

become to convert to European Christianity and become truly “civilized.” As Europeans began to lose hope that the Chinese could be truly converted to Christianity, Chinese began to lose their whiteness in European eyes. It was not yet decided what different color they would be but one thing was certain. They were not white.

It was Carl Linnaeus that first conceived the idea that the *Homo asiaticus* (for humans were split into species defined by race at the time) had a sickly yellow color. He labeled them *luridus*, meaning pallid or sallow. He described Asians as the follow in his book *Systema naturae*:

Asian: pale yellow, melancholy, rigid.

Hair black. Eyes dark.

Severe, haughty, avaricious.

Covered in loose garments.

Governed by opinions. (translated by Keevak)

Asians were classified as yellow and that particular skin tone had various negative personality characteristics that went along with it. The concept of the Chinese as yellow did not emerge as a popularly accepted idea until the nineteenth century when the west began to formalize their concept of race.

It was anthropologists who began to formalize the classification of the “Mongoloid” race as yellow. Paul Broca was a physical anthropologist that created a system for classifying skin color. It was believed that skin color was a combination of

four different colors: white, black, red and yellow. When East Asian skin was held up to the system, it was generally agreed that their skin color was closest to the yellow color than any other. This was an “intermediate” shade used to relegate East Asians to an inferior racial position, but also used to ensure that they were not as “inferior” as the blacks or reds. Even when the skin of a Chinese person was fair enough to be classified as white according to the test, the testers attempted to create explanations, citing the possible presence of some Aryan ancestry. By the end of the nineteenth century, the idea that East Asians were the yellow race had been accepted—by all sides.

### CHAPTER III

#### RACE AS CHINESE IDENTITY

##### **The Reformers' Nationalist Race**

The system of race was brought to China from Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century. One key difficulty in determining how China's racial system operates is the fact that China was never fully colonized. In states that had been subject to modern European colonization there is a common denominator to their systems of race—overwhelming white privilege. China underwent a unique process of dominance and powerlessness.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, China faced many crushing military defeats, including the humiliation of the First Opium War in from 1839 to 1842 and the Second Opium War from 1856 to 1860. After realizing that their military could not stand up to those of the dominant western powers they were shocked once more to be defeated by the Japanese in the Sino-Japanese War from 1894 to 1895. China had accepted the military dominance of the western powers, but their defeat at the hands of the Japanese was the last straw. The Chinese realized that they needed to change, and often enough they decided this change should be brought about in a similar manner to the Japanese Meiji Restoration of 1868—i.e., through westernization. In this period, translations of western works flooded China. The Mandarin language itself became Europeanized in the process resulting in using things like gendered pronouns or elongated descriptive

sentences. One key translation that would deeply affect the Chinese consciousness was Yan Fu's translation of Herbert Spencer's *Study of Sociology* (1873, trans. 1902). Through these translations he created a version of Social Darwinism distinct to China. He translated evolution in a way that denoted that human history can be seen as a sort of evolution. In his own writings Yan Fu introduced race as the new dividing point between the *hua* and the *yi*:

There are four main races on the earth: the yellow, the white, the brown and the black. The yellow race's territory is contiguous with Siberia in the north, extending to the South China Sea, bordered by the Pacific and up to the Kunlun mountains in the west. They have prominent cheek-bones, a shallow nose, long eyes and straight hair. The white race dwells west of the salt lakes of the Urals, on the ancient territory conquered by *Daqin* [Rome]. They have blue eyes and curly hair, a prominent forehead and deep-set eye-sockets. On the many islands south of Vietnam, west of Luzon and east of India is the brown race. The black race is the lowest. They live in Africa and in the territories around the tropics. They are the so-called black slaves ("The Discourse of Race in Modern China" 68).

People could be assessed, simply by their biology. Instead of intelligence being a marker of civilization, race now signified an individual's intelligence.

Even though some racial identities and power structures were forced upon the Chinese, they appropriated the system of race for themselves and used it to fit their own

political purposes. Chinese reformers actively shaped racial identity in the 1890s and through the creation of racial identities continued to change the *hua-yi* boundaries. In 1898, the young Guangxu Emperor undertook the Hundred Days' Reform, an attempt to make large and lasting institutional and social changes to the Chinese state in order to return China to its former position of power. Some of these changes included: the creation of a modern education system that stressed math and science rather than the Confucian classics; accepting the principles of capitalism to bolster the economy; rapidly modernizing China's manufacturing and commerce capabilities. Kang Youwei and his student Liang Qichao were two of the main reformer advisors to the Emperor during the Hundred Days' Reform. Unfortunately, the Hundred Days' Reform ended in failure when conservatives led by Empress Dowager Cixi staged a coup d'etat and put the Emperor under house arrest in the Forbidden City until his death in 1908. They declared that the reforms were too radical and a more gradual approach to development had to be taken.

The reformers wanted to introduce the western ideas of liberalism, biological science and capitalism. These three concepts are inextricably tied to race and racism. Liberalism is a political philosophy that preaches equality and justice. Unfortunately the original fathers of liberalism such as Locke and Kant referred only to the equality of gentrified white men. There could be some people who were equal, but then there were exceptions. Indeed its creators supported these exceptions, which would eventually manifest in racism.

[T]he most striking manifestation of this symbiotic rather than conflictual relation is that the two philosophers earlier demarcated as central to the liberal tradition, Locke and Kant, limited property rights, self-ownership, and person-hood racially. Locke invested in African slavery, justified Native American expropriation, and helped write the Carolina constitution of 1669, which gave masters absolute power over their slaves (Mills 1382).

In order to simultaneously support liberalism and the practice of slavery, complicated philosophies had to be created in order to justify the exception of some people from equality. Today's complicated system of institutionalized racism emerged as the answer to this conundrum. From its origins, liberalism was not meant to mean equality for all people. Racism was also inseparable from the biological science that China would have been learning from the West at the time. As discussed above, race and racism are often assumed to be rooted in biology. During the nineteenth century, when China was being introduced to the western biology, there was within biology a large push to find scientific proof to legitimize racism. A number of pseudo-science practices had emerged to differentiate between the races. This tradition stretched all the way back to the early seventeenth century with debates on how to classify the different races and account for how their differences came to be. Some believed black skin to be a skin disease. Some believed humans had different origins, the polygenist theory. Some used Craniometry or the practice of measuring the skulls of individuals of different races to provide information on that race's intelligence—in order to justify racial difference. For China,

learning western biology meant learning biology that was steeped in this racist tradition.

Today, capitalism is an economic system that provides an easy space for racism.

Capitalism requires there to be a winner and a loser, and unlike the winners and losers of the past, the boundaries between the two are much more subtle. Capitalism appropriates the labor of the lower class in discreet ways, so that the oppression is less noticeable. This provides the perfect system for racism to reside. Racism often intersects with capitalism, often resulting in an economic glass ceiling for people of color. Through these concepts, the reformers were introduced to and became captivated with concepts of race and how they could use them for China.

The most famous (and infamous) reformer of the period was Kang Youwei. Kang Youwei was born in 1858 to a family from the gentry. His academic talents were noticed from a young age and he was sent to study Confucianism to pass the civil service exams. He became disillusioned when confronted with what he considered the restrictive tradition of the civil service exams. Instead he began to form visions of reforming the Chinese state. When China was defeated by Japan, Kang Youwei sent a list of reforms he thought should be implemented to the Qing court. His list was ignored so he turned to influencing the educated class. He opened a school in Guangzhou in 1890. One of his students, and another key reformer, was Liang Qichao. Liang Qichao was born in 1873 to a farming family. He passed the second level provincial exams at 16, the youngest person to ever do so. That was the end of his civil service exam progress however. At his national exams, his paper's heterodox views made the examiner mistakenly believe that his paper belonged to Kang Youwei, who the examiner had been told to automatically



fail. Liang Qichao became interested in western ideas and ultimately went to study under Kang Youwei. Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao's goal was to unite China under a constitutional monarchy; they decided that the recent system of race to reach China was an appropriate way to bring this about. In China, yellow was in fact a color with longstanding positive associations. It was considered one of the five pure colors of China, often being associated with the grandeur of the emperor. Thus the reformers used this new "yellow identity" to unify China under a positive marker.

As discussed earlier, it was during the Qing dynasty that the amorphous identity that made up the variegated Qing empire began to be questioned. Scholars tried to answer the question, what is China? Lineage became a possible answer to this question. Evolving from a longstanding lineage discourse in China that was not tied to biology came the idea of biological descent:

The militarization of powerful lineages reinforced models of kinship solidarity, forcing in turn more loosely organized associations to form a unified descent group under the leadership of the gentry. At the court level, too, ideologies of descent became increasingly important, in particular with the erosion of a sense of cultural identity among Manchu aristocrats ("Continuities and Permutations" 15).

Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao "appropriated scientific knowledge from foreign discursive repertoires [and] actively manipulated evolutionary theories to bolster theories of pure origins" ("Continuities and Permutations" 15). They used the popular ancient

figure of the Yellow Emperor (to be discussed below) to unite the Chinese people under one lineage—a racial lineage.

Liang Qichao used origin traditions to compose a hierarchy of races. “A Song encyclopedia of the tenth century recorded a popular legend on the origins of mankind which divided people between noble and ignoble classes: the noble had been made of yellow mud, the ignoble of vulgar rope” (“Continuities and Permutations,” 55). Using this distinction between the noble and the ignoble he grouped the races into two groups: the noble, superior or historical races and the ignoble, inferior or ahistorical races. The white and yellow races were the historical races, or the races that were the most competitive and thus still had a place of power in the history of the world. The red and black races had long ago lost to the white man, and thus were relegated to a lower status from which they could never win the racial war. This idea was a welcome break to the Chinese feeling of inferiority stemming from its recent military losses. Race simultaneously allowed the Chinese to feel automatically better than some groups of people based on their skin color and allowed the Chinese to place themselves on the same stage as whites. By placing themselves on this stage it gave them the ontological space to take positive actions to fight for their position in the new world order.

Liang Qichao used Yan Fu’s translated idea of evolution in explaining the race war. He wrote, in 1898: “If a country can strengthen itself and make itself one of the fittest, then, even if it annihilates the unfit and the weak, it can still not be said to be immoral. Why? Because it is a law of evolution” (Liang, 34). Kang Youwei had an approach that was more in line with Confucian humanism. He believed that eventually a

singular, perfected race would emerge. However he believed that this race would come about by breeding superior races with inferior races.

The reformers agreed with Wei Yuan's plan to learn from the foreigners in that it was only by grouping the Chinese under a racial identity that they could become stronger. "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' ("Continuities and Permutations" 17). In fact many theories in China emerged with regard other countries' correlations between their racial homogeneity and their power. India was believed to have been colonized because the caste system did not allow the state to come together through race. Russia was criticized because according to some 'scientific' reports, Russians had Asian blood in them, and thus, since they were not racially pure, they could not appropriately group together to form a resistance. But could China truly come together under the Yellow racial identity or would race turn into yet another point of division in China?

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

At the same time that the reformers were creating the unifying identity of the yellow race, the revolutionaries were creating distinctions between the Han and Manchu races. One of Kang Youwei's students was the foremost voice in this field. Zhang Binglin began his career in line with Kang's wish to reform the system and bring both the Han and the Manchu together in a more equal government. Kang believed that the Manchu

had absorbed enough “Chinese” culture to be accepted as Chinese. Zhang, however, soon departed from this view and began to support a more radical departure from the Manchu government, wanting to completely overthrow the current emperor. Zhang strongly opposed the discriminatory policies to which the Manchu had subjected the Han during the Qing dynasty. An example of this discrimination was that in order to ensure that Han people could not integrate into the Manchu system, Han were not allowed to migrate to the Manchu homeland. Han were set apart as having fewer rights. In order to bring the Chinese nation together, Kang looked towards a racial origin myth, the Yellow Emperor. Zhang reinterpreted the difference through Kang’s race and a racial origin story in order to support his political goals and separate the Han from the Manchu. “Unlike racial theorists in nineteenth-century Europe, Chinese revolutionaries did not always focus on grounding racial differences in biology. It was not so much that the revolutionaries were not interested in doing so, but few convincing physical differences could be found between the Manchus and the Han” (Chow 46).

Instead they looked to origin myths to demarcate between the races. Origin myths had always been important for identity, and thus Zhang turned to Sima Qian:

In the *Records of the Historian*, the ancient historian Sima Qian began his account of ancient history with the Yellow Emperor, leaving out the mythical ‘Three Kings’ (*sanhuang*). He also said that the Yellow Emperor had twenty-five sons, of whom only two had the same surname. He reconstructed the descent line of the Yellow Emperor, including all the important sage-kings. The habit of tracing

ancestry back to ancient historical figures, especially to the Yellow Emperor, had been deeply entrenched since Sima Qian's mythical account of the beginning of Chinese history (47).

The Yellow Emperor was already a popular figure in the people's mind, and thus he was an easy character to appropriate for political use. Zhang Binglin decided to use the Yellow Emperor not as the origin of the Chinese people, but as the origin of the Han race. It was a relatively easy process due to the fact that "[since] the late Ming, it had become common for different lineages with the same surname to 'join ancestors' (*lianzong*) and establish fictive kinship ties through a famous historical figure" (48). Thus connection through historical figures was already a practice, and the idea of the Yellow Emperor as the Han race's origins fit into the discourse on race rather easily. The idea of the Yellow Emperor as the father of the Han race quickly became popular among the revolutionaries, dividing the original unified yellow race. The liberal political ideology of the revolutionaries fractured the idea of equality even more than Liang Qichao's racial hierarchies had. The yellow race of China became subdivided into the 'ethnicities' of China, with the Han people at the top of the system. Thus did the new liberalism of the Chinese state result in the further racialization of China.

### **Race in the Republic of China**

Kang Youwei failed in creating his vision of a constitutional monarchy. Instead it was Zhang Binglin and the revolutionaries that succeeded in their political goals. In 1911 the Wuchang Uprising set in motion the events that would finally take the Qing empire completely out of power and end a two thousand year tradition of imperial rule in China. On 10 October 1911, Sun Yat-sen was elected President of the new Republic of China. The Republic of China would last until 1949, when the Communists would take over and create the People's Republic of China. The Republic of China Can be defined by its increase in the speed of the earlier westernizing tendencies. Most of this change was initiated by the New Culture Movement that began in 1915. This was a response to the power struggles occurring in Republic of China and the resulting inability to protect China from encroaching Japanese imperialism. It was in 1915 that China agreed to Japan's Twenty One Demands, which confirmed the legitimacy of much of Japan's current holdings in China. The New Culture Movement sought to revitalize China and set it on the right course again. The leaders of the movement, Lu Xun, Zhou Zhoun, Chen Duxiu and others, believed that the correct way to do this was to reject Confucianism and called for a China based on western values. The western sciences were institutionalized in the Republican period as part of the educational discourse. A Chinese version of concepts of race and racism were solidified in China during this time.

Racial purity became a large part of the racial discourse in the Republican period. Primarily absolute racial purity was attributed to the Han, and the other ethnicities in China began to be ranked in terms of purity. Li Chi used craniology to "prove" that the Tungus of Siberia (the same area the Manchu came from) had polluted the Yellow

Emperor's divine lineage. Zhang Junjun used blood to show how the Type A ethnicities polluted the Type O blood of the Han race.

Another key part to the racial discourse was to use biology to prove that the Chinese race was one of the superior races. In his book *Minzu suzhi zhi gaizao* Zhang Junjun argues against the claim that since Chinese brains weigh less than European brains, they are inferior. He claims that:

[T]he average body weight of our race is less compared to that of the Europeans, but the cranial weight of our people is superior to that of the Europeans. Thus one can deduce that the cranial coefficient of the Chinese race is very high, and one may conclude that the development of our race's cranial strength is not inferior to that of any other race! (34)

In order to disprove European theories of Chinese inferiority, Zhang decided to meet the Europeans on their own field and use the European pseudo-science of craniology. Tong Runzhi also used western science to prove the intelligence of the Chinese race. He fully endorsed results of the IQ tests which claimed that blacks and reds were normally less intelligent than Chinese.

Eugenics was another area of western sociology popularized in China in this period. It was introduced to the masses by Chen Yinghuan, whose 1918 book *Renleixue* (Anthropology) describes eugenics as a process called *renzhong gailiang* (improvement of the race) and *youshengxue* (science of super birth). Xia Yuzhong, a professor of

Chinese literature at Beijing Normal University “advocated the founding of eugenic laboratories at the provincial level and the establishment of special villages where people with perfect brains and ideal bodies could be bred in order to generate the future ‘model race’ (“The Discourse of Race in Modern China” 170). This became even more racially based in the work of Hu Zongyuan, who claimed that the intelligence of a race was hereditary and “some ethnologists claim that the intelligent races rule, the stupid [*yu*] races serve, the strong flourish, the weak perish” (Hu 1). Chen Changheng claimed that racial degeneration was the real threat to China. His idea was not that strange, considering the United States had already begun to implement eugenics programs in which poor women of color were sterilized.

One of the prime reasons that race became solidified during this period was that it moved from the realm of the scholars down to the people. This occurred due to a rise of the press spurred on by the New Culture Movement. The New Culture Movement emphasized the use of the vernacular in order for people with little education to have access to books. The periodical press had been introduced by the reformers in the late nineteenth century. Now with the abolishment of the imperial examination system in 1905 and the introduction of a new education system, periodicals became a popular way of disseminating knowledge. Many of these books that spread to the masses were *congshu* or self-study books written by academics.

Eugenics first appeared in an article entitled “Evolution and eugenics,” published in 1923 in the periodical *Eastern Miscellany*. By 1924 it had made it to middle school textbooks. *Textbook of Civil Biology* introduced eugenics with the idea that:



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 (Shoucheng 52).

Textbooks on genetics warned against the dangers of racial degeneration. Official marriage guides urged people to marry people of superior races. Newspapers like *Central Daily* and *New China Times* promoted eugenics and racial health. Not only was racial purity of the yellow race supported in these publications, but there were specific references to Han as being the true pure race. Zhang Junjun published in 1935 a work entitled *Reform of the Chinese Race*. “The original superior Han bloodstream had been submerged by successive strains of worthless barbarian blood; intermarriage and migration had led to the progressive degeneration of the Chinese race” (“Continuities and Permutations” 182).

By the time Mao Zedong overthrew the Republic of China in 1949 racism was ingrained in the Chinese identity. I will not delve deeply into racial discourse during the Maoist era because the racial ideology is subsumed in Maoism and his particular form of nationalism. Race plays a major part in determining the Chineseness of communist nationalism, as the Chinese nation was conceived as a biological entity at this point, but it is not seriously touched upon. During a 1963 speech Mao said that “In Africa, in

Asia, in every part of the world there is racism; in reality, racial problems are class problems.” On one level China is divorced from considering itself racist due to anti-imperialist propaganda that claimed that only whites could be racist.

In fact the idea of unity with Africa against the white man was supported officially during this period, but the reality was that blacks in China complained of constant prejudice. Emmanuel Hevi was a Ghanaian in China in the early 1960s who claimed that: “In all their dealings with us [blacks] the Chinese behaved as if they were dealing with people from whom normal intelligence could not be expected” (Hevi 187). This racialized identity combined with a removal of race as a discourse left China vulnerable when it reopened up to the world in 1979. China approaches the three concepts of liberalism, biological science and capitalism in a unique way. For the most part during the first half of the twentieth century, Chinese scholars actively create their own forms of race and racism. At the same time however, the structure for white privilege is set deep in the new China’s foundation, allowing for white privilege to re-emerge in a significant way later on when China is faced with the new task of fitting into the international order of the late twentieth century.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE NEW RACISM

#### **Whiteness in *Shanghai Baby***

In this section I contend that starting from the late seventies, in looking upon the western world as a model to base their economic system on, China is introduced to an unbridled rush of white privilege.

If Chinese culture in the may Fourth period (from 1919 to roughly the end of the twenties) can be said to have been “colonized” for the first time, then Deng Xiaoping’s era from the late seventies to 1997—divided by the 1989 Tiananmen Incident into the “New Era” (prior to 1989) and the “Post-New Era” (after 1989 till his death)—has witnessed a “second colonization. (Chan 58)

Due to China’s earlier foundation of the white privilege dimension of colonization, and the lack of racial discourse in China during the time, new white privileges slip into the subconscious of Chinese culture and more specifically, Chinese literature.

*Shanghai Baby* (1999) is a semi-autobiographical novel written by Wei Hui about a young, beautiful female Chinese author called Coco. It chronicles Coco’s relationship with her impotent Chinese boyfriend Tian Tian and her sexually charged romantic trysts

with a seductive German, Mark. She spends much of the book posturizing on what she wants from life. This struggle is represented through her struggles in the choice between her two lovers.

*Shanghai Baby* is currently banned in China due to its graphic sexual details but the book does a good job of describing the culture of the young, affluent Shanghainese of the nineties. *Shanghai Baby*'s protagonist Coco in no way represents the average person in China. Shanghai is special in its history. It was one of the original cities that the British occupied during the First Opium War all the way back in mid-nineteenth century. From there it became a treaty port, and thus was in frequent contact with Europeans for most of its modern history. I use it as an extreme example of China in which systems of white privilege would be most ingrained, but which makes the subtleties of white privilege in other parts of China easier to see. *Shanghai Baby* comes from a special, privileged point of view however, that of a woman educated in both western and Chinese traditions. Thus even though often it succumbs to internalized forms of racism, it does have a consciousness of the racism going on in China.

The most overwhelming of Mill's dimensions of white privilege in *Shanghai Baby* is internalized cultural white supremacy. The character of Coco is obsessed with western culture, and spends much of the novel making references to western culture. Almost every page has a reference of everything from *Pulp Fiction* to *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Chinese arts are referenced very infrequently. Her preoccupation with western culture points to an internalized belief that only whites have a culture of value. Knowledge of white culture is a type of social currency that proves one's worth. In trying

to impress Mark, Coco displays her western education. ““Do you find that droll?’ I asked, using the French word” (Hui, 30). Wei emphasizes the fact that Coco is using French, and that makes her more desirable. So often are references to western culture used that one must conjecture that Wei herself is attempting to prove her book’s value as ‘cosmopolitan’ literature through these references.

One way that Wei suggests as a way to judge good literature is through the ennoblement of translation. After Coco has an interview with a German journalist, Mark remarks on her future success. “‘I like your stories a lot, and I’m sure you’ll be widely respected,’ said Mark. ‘One day your books will be translated into German’”(Hui, 97). German is given the sole ability to confer prestige upon a book. The success of her book is judged on whether or not a white audience will enjoy it as if only whites can decide if it is good literature.

Wei also demonstrates how knowledge of western culture intersects with class. She shows that to be of the upper class, one must have an intimate knowledge of western culture. “Daddy is a slightly chubby history professor who likes cigars and heart-to-heart talks with young people. By the time I was three, he had trained me to appreciate operas such as *La Boheme*” (Hui 19). Nowhere does Coco comment on any type of Chinese cultural education received from her father.

Wei demonstrates the Chinese perception of whites in her comparison of the Chinese boyfriend Tian Tian to the sexually aggressive Mark. Through her description of Mark the combination of Chinese racism and white privilege is evident. Chinese have a complicated relationship to white sexuality:

Although the extreme prudery of much Chinese writing makes it difficult to find any material pertaining to the relation between sex and race, the negative image of the Westerner in nineteenth-century literature was of a hairy, meat-eating, libidinous, tall, white devil against whom the virgin should be protected. Mixed feelings of fear, disgust, secret admiration and envy led to an ambivalent attitude towards foreign sexuality that continues to this day (“The Modern Discourse of Race in China” 158).

Coco demonstrates the somatic element of white privilege, finding Mark’s white skin and blond hair beautiful. “Both sets of four limbs entangled like an octopus, embracing and dancing, the man’s golden body hair glistening so provocatively that my body itched all over” (25). However at the same time she is appreciating white beauty, she exoticizes Mark’s sexuality, likening him to a beast. She shows a racist attitude towards whites, likening them to animals, while simultaneously finding this animalistic sexuality attractive. “His eyes were shining in the darkness, like those of an animal lurking in the shrubbery... Those eyes of his seemed like the epicenter of his body, and all his energy emanated from there. A white man’s eyes” (Hui, 30).

Also, because Mark is German, Coco associates him with the Nazi era in a sadistic sexualized fashion.

I imagined what he would be like in high boots and a leather coat, and what kind of cruelty would show in those Teutonic blue eyes. These thoughts increased my

excitement. “Every woman adores a Fascist / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you...” wrote Sylvia Plath. (Hui 63)

Mark represents the hyper-sexualizing of the white man. Tian Tian’s impotence represents the desexualizing of the Chinese man. This results in an interesting mix of negative stereotyping that Chinese impose upon whites and that Chinese internalize about themselves.

Surprisingly enough, a juridico-political dimension of white supremacy is demonstrated in *Shanghai Baby*. When Coco and her friends go out for a picnic on the lawn of the Xingguo Guest House they are encountered by a white woman who asks them to leave. In a decidedly racist way, she tells them that they are disrupting her unbroken view of the beautiful lawn. Eventually Coco, and her friends give in and leave after the woman claims to have important connections. They recognize that because she is white and living in a rich area, she is likely to have well-established important connections. Due to these connections the law would not be on their side. This demonstrates a juridico-political element of racism in contemporary China, despite the fact that the Chinese government is now a powerful and independent entity. Mills explains this white supremacy in the modern international system:

The modern world order, what Paul Keal calls “international society” (1), is created by European expansionism, and the conquest and expropriation of indigenous peoples is central to that process: “non-Europeans were progressively

conceptualized in ways that dehumanized them and enabled their dispossession and subordination (21). (Mills 1388)

At the same time that Wei explains this dimension of white privilege, she uses this example of white racism to consciously fight the cognitive-evaluative dimension of white privilege.

On our way back we all talked about that sign in Shanghai's former French Concession: CHINESE AND DOGS KEEP OUT. Now that the multinational corporations and financial giants were staging a comeback, their economic clout would undoubtedly give them a sense of the foreigner's superiority. For the first time, we Chinese Generation Xers felt a direct threat to our own self-esteem. (Hui, 84)

In this one part of the book Wei ensures that the problems of white privilege do not go overlooked.

Wei Hui's character Coco proves to be a good example of the Chinese' mixed view of whites. White privilege exists in many different levels—cultural, somatic, and juridico-political—that are both internalized and conscious. At the same time Mark is made into a caricature through his over-sexualization. He occupies a superior position in the novel, yet at the same time he does not exist as a person that can be a subject. He



becomes an object when he is colored by the stereotypes accompanying the white racial identity.

### **Selling Whiteness**

White privilege becomes most obvious when looking at the capitalist system. Whiteness sells, both somatic whiteness and cultural whiteness. As of 2011, the Chinese cosmetics industry was worth 110.3 billion Yuan, or approximately 18 billion USD today (“China’s Cosmetic Market, 2011” 4). Two billion dollars of this industry is dedicated solely to skin-whitening products. “Almost half of Asians aged 25 to 34 years used skin whiteners in a business that some analysts have said could be worth billions of dollars” (Bray). Advertisements push the “Get white” message, claiming that whitened skin is the beautiful ideal. Models in China are very pale to begin with but on top of that their magazine pictures are often photoshopped to make them appear even whiter. Whiteness is considered beautiful.

At this point we reach a difficult part of the argument to navigate. Most people simply attribute this extreme desire for whiteness to the ancient classist traditions in China valuing whiteness. This is most likely an element of the skin-whitening craze. It is definitely at least partially a product of the revival of capitalism and the resulting positive emphasis put on being in the upper class. In the Maoist ideology whiteness was a negative physical attribute. “Late in the 1960s, a schoolgirl from an ordinary worker's family might well be ashamed of the ‘evil whiteness’ of her skin. Her dreams are to be rid

of the ‘capitalistic color’” (“The Changing Face of Chinese Beauty”). Classism is part of the argument, but it is not the full argument. Part of the desire for whiteness is linked to the privileging of whites somatically. I became convinced of this firstly through my own personal interactions with Chinese women in China. Even though my skin was a few shades darker than some of the Chinese women I encountered, Chinese women often spoke about how they envied my white skin. Thus it was not simply whiteness they desired, but specifically the type of whiteness associated with the white race. This becomes more obvious when looking at other trends of a partiality white racial characteristics.

Many Chinese women undergo cosmetic surgery to make their faces look more like whites’ faces. Dr. Kim Byung-gun, the head of Seoul, South Korea’s biggest plastic surgery clinic, BK DongYang explains that:

We can see potential huge growth, with the number of patients from China. The Chinese people want to have the westernized face. They don't like their faces. They have big cheekbones, big mandible angle without double fold, and a low profile nose. They are seeking to have westernized face, high profile nose, slender nice cheekbone, and mandible bone. (Lah)

Chinese often give preference to white looks, and want to look more like whites. This is also a controversial statement, as many people would disagree, claiming that the blepharoplasty is commonly undergone to have eyes that look like other East Asians,

rather than whites. They claim that contemporary Chinese women undergo surgery to look more like popular Chinese actresses rather than whites.

In the 1990s, many women wanted features that made them look more Western: wide eyes, full lips, large breasts and long legs. These days many young women try to look like their favorite Hong Kong, Taiwan or Chinese movies stars of pop singers. Many Asian women come for surgery brandishing photographs of two very popular Chinese actresses -- Angelababy and Fan Bing Bing -- whose chins or eyes they want copied (“Facts and Details”).

The issue with this argument is that Chinese actresses often have had surgery to make their faces fit more to white racial beauty ideals. Angelababy had surgeries to create longer, slim cheekbones and increase the height of her nose bridge—typically more white characteristics. This points to internalized white privilege which preferences white (specifically Northern European) features.

There is also internalized white privilege in terms of cultural capital. Whites are associated with wealth, power and status. This sign of wealth is used in the Chinese job market by hiring whites to make a business seem more powerful. The Nanjing villa project put out this job advertisement asking for applicants:

Location: A luxury villa project in a Nanjing suburb. Wanted: Two reception assistants. Race: White.

This race-based hiring requirement reflects the Chinese belief that western whiteness signifies status. Being white means that one is important. If a white person is working for the company, it means that the company is important. Ms Xu Yueqin, a real estate executive working for the Nanjing villa project explained the phenomenon by saying, “[other] companies do the same thing. By and large, Chinese still think all things Western are better.” (“Now Hiring in China: Only Whites Need Apply”).

There also exists a Rent-a-White phenomenon rampant in China now. Chinese companies will rent white men to add face to their company. Sometimes the hired white simply has to sit in on a meeting to lend it more legitimacy. Sometimes the hired white is given a rather creative role:

Last year, Jonathan Zatkan, an American actor who lives in Beijing, posed as the vice president of an Italian jewelry company that had, allegedly, been in a partnership with a Chinese jewelry chain for a decade. Zatkan was paid 2,000 yuan (about \$300) to fly, along with a couple of Russian models, to a small city in the central province of Henan where he delivered a speech for the grand opening ceremony of a jewelry store there (Farrar).

The association of whites with power is taken to the extreme. Zhang Haihua explains the association by claiming that: “[b]ecause Western countries are so developed, people think they are more well off, so people think that if a company can hire foreigners, it must

really have very important connections overseas. So when they really want to impress someone, they may roll out a foreigner” (Farrar).

It is not being a *foreigner* that has this connotation however. In this context foreigner is code for a white person. Blacks are not hired as signs of wealth and power, despite the fact that many blacks live in western developed countries. Blacks are not desirable as signifiers. Chinese do not often hire blacks for ESL teaching jobs, reflecting a wish among Chinese parents that whites, specifically English or Americans, are the only ones that can teach English; in other words they believe whites are the only true carriers of the English culture. Whites have enormous amounts of cultural capital. Whiteness sells.

### **Anti-White Nationalism**

My introduction quotes Yang Rui, the popular host of the CCTV show *Dialogue*. To contextualize the quote, this was written after a huge scandal in China resulting from an incident that occurred on 8 May 2012 in the Xicheng district of Beijing, where a white British man sexually assaulted a Chinese woman. He was stopped by a group of Chinese men and subsequently beaten. The events that followed this assault demonstrate a growth in anti-foreigner sentiments and an increase in Chinese nationalism.

A video was taken of the assault and was posted on Youtube with the caption “Beijingers, remember this *laowai*’s [a foreigner of non-Chinese ancestry] face. We’ll beat him up every time we see him.” This video went viral, receiving more than seven

million hits in two days. Most of the outrage in response to this video was directed towards the fact that the assaulter was a foreigner. One netizen in Yantai, Shandong Province responded saying, “Damn foreigner. You’d think it was 100 years ago when the foreigners came to China and did as they pleased” (Hayoun). User A Guitar and Cigarette wrote, “there must be a lot like this guy in Shanghai. Send all the foreign criminals back.” This video exposed an anti-foreigner current in contemporary China, specifically directed at white men’s sexuality. One of the Chinese men that protected the girl who was being sexually assaulted by the British man told *The Global Times* that part of his actions were due to the fact that the assaulter was a foreigner. “After I grabbed his neck and saw he’s a *laowai*, I felt more obligated to save the girl.” This is a racialized discontent aimed at the fallacy of white animalistic sexuality.

This racialized discontent is especially directed at blacks. Lou Jing, a girl born to a Chinese mother and an African American father, first appeared on the Shanghai pop idol contest “Go Oriental Angels” in August 2009. She was lovingly nicknamed “Chocolate Girl” by the hosts, but online forums erupted in hostility. Netizens wrote various cruel things, saying that she never should have been born and should never have had the audacity to appear on television. However many other people, like author Hung Huang, rose to her defense—asking how the Chinese could reject this girl in the same year that Americans had accepted Obama into the White House? The multi-faceted reaction to Lou Jing reflects many different facets of the Chinese view of race. First of all there is the race component to Chinese national identity. Lou Jing is not accepted as Chinese despite the fact that she was raised speaking Chinese in Shanghai by a single

Chinese mother. People who are not of the Chinese race are not accepted into the Chinese identity. Secondly there is the myth of foreigner hyper-sexuality, which is used to condemn foreigners. Finally there is the dimension of racial purity—that by mixing Chinese blood with black blood, the race becomes tainted. Yet at the same time these negative narratives on race come together to create such hateful views towards Lou Jing, people still rise to defend her, citing America's ostensible push past racism through the election of Obama. Perhaps the United States' struggle to combat racism will inspire China to join in the effort.

## CONCLUSION

### **The Mixed Place of Race in China: Where do we go from here?**

Race and racism in China has evolved through an active process of accepting and rejecting western forms of race. Although the Chinese enthusiastically accepted western ideas on race as a classification system, they also vigorously appropriated the system and shaped it for their own purposes. The Chinese government made the distinctive choice to open China back up to the world in 1979, and once again made a strong decision in promoting their recent anti-foreigner legislation. China does not conform to the typical post-colonialist theories of race and racism. It is unique in its history and unique in its relationship with race. Unfortunately the particularities of China's racial system are mostly unknown, both to China and to the world. This presents a unique problem for China's relationship to its people and China's relationship to the rest of the world.

Today, according to government statistics, 92% of China's population is Han. The People's Republic of China officially recognizes 55 minorities in China. The process of recognizing these minorities was linked to the race purist discourse of the Republican era, and thus many of the demarcations are unfair. Due to the tradition solidified by Zhang Binglin, subsumed within Chinese nationalism is a predilection towards only letting Han hold the Chinese identity. One issue China will have in the near future will be fully integrating its minority population into mainstream Chinese culture. In order to do this



China must understand how its minorities came about. China must also understand how its relationship with foreigners came about.

In China, whites hold a unique position. Whiteness carries with it an infinite number of contradicting identities. Whiteness is associated with beauty, wealth, sexuality and success. These associations come together to create a complex network of privileges in China, but these privileges go unexplained and misunderstood. Due to the lack of racial discourse in contemporary China, Chinese have no tools with which to address and break down the racism within their country. This causes backlash against whites and other foreigners, which becomes grounded in Chinese racism and stereotyping. The Chinese racial system must be discussed in order for it to be overcome.

The United States must also become aware of China's racial system. China is the United States' biggest trading partner, and both nations will continue to have a dramatic influence upon each other. As America attempts to address its racial issues and even has the audacity to speak of already reaching a "post-racial" America, it must recognize that western forms of race and racism have already been exported to the rest of the world, and each country has developed its own version of it now. Racism and the accompanying white privilege can no longer be fought simply on a domestic scale. Instead, there must be international cooperation to fight a now globalized system of racism.

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