

## The Discourse of Race in Modern China



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but regional sources are also represented, four of the articles coming from provincial newspapers. Amongst the senior figures whose views are represented in the volume are Mao Zedong, Chen Yun, Peng Dehuai and Li Fuchun.

A key tenet of the economic strategy of the First Five-Year Plan (1953–57) was the need to pursue a coordinated pattern of development in accordance with the 'law of planned, proportionate development'. Arguments about the validity of this prescription to China's economic circumstances effectively dominated policy making during the 1950s and early 1960s and the drama of the evolving debate is well captured in a number of documents translated here. In September 1956, Li Fuchun already recognized the extent to which disproportions had emerged in the economy. In his insistence that '... in economic life, balance is absolute' (p. 37) Li advocated a readjustment of priorities from industry towards agriculture. But the extent to which the Great Leap strategy overtook such orthodoxy is suggested in the statement, proclaimed in a *People's Daily* editorial less than 18 months later, that 'in all matters imbalance is constant and absolute' (p. 64: emphasis added).

By February 1959, even Mao admitted that the new policy had given rise to '... supply shortages and ... sectoral dislocation' (p. 87). But his references to the need for 'planned and proportionate development' remained less than convincing and his remark that 'I have an inclination for leaps forward' (p. 79) seems the more significant. Peng Dehuai was one senior official who spoke out early and strongly against the errors of the previous year (see, for example, his 'Letter of Opinion' and its criticism of 'petty-bourgeois fanaticism' (p. 92). His protests were, however, ineffective and merely precipitated his dismissal as Minister of Defence. As a secret CCP Central Committee policy directive (September 1961) included here shows, a further two years were to elapse before policies of 'adjustment and consolidation' were introduced to restore the economic situation. Yet once recovery was completed, Mao's reluctance to accept the dictates of orderly, technical economic planning reasserted itself and on the eve of the Third Plan, in December 1964 he was once more asserting the primacy of political leadership over reliance on the 'addition, subtraction, multiplication and division' (p. 132) of technical planning.

The diversity of the documents contained in this collection vividly captures the tone of the economic debate during these years and serves too to highlight the very different approaches towards economic strategy and planning shown by Mao and other senior figures. The translations also bring out the peculiar mixture of the mundane and the elevated that characterizes so much of China's economic literature. The visionary quality of Mao's utterances emerges clearly and contrasts with the technical economic orthodoxy of Li Fuchun. Striking too is the matter-of-fact quality of Chen Yun's remarkable report on China's economic condition in the wake of the Great Leap Forward, with its call to supply more soya beans and 'millions of nylon socks' to the urban population (p. 127).

The documents are, however, valuable not only as historical records, but also as evidence of the continuity of issues which have faced the Chinese government throughout the last four decades. For example, it is a fascinating discovery that a policy of 'contracting output down to the household' was advocated in parts of Zhejiang province as early as January 1957, in an attempt to counter the excessive centralization of the agricultural producers' co-operatives [collectives] and preserve the 'initiative and carefulness of individual peasant production' (p. 239). That such pragmatism was not unique is attested to by Deng Zihui's defence of 'dispersed' methods of management for animal rearing in terms worthy of Deng Xiaoping himself:

'As for whether production management is highly concentrated or appropriately dispersed, ... the criterion to be adopted is simply: of whatever is beneficial to production' (p. 233).

By 1959 such 'absurd' views were under strong attack—characteristically in terms which relied more on ideological sloganeering (such as that contractual arrangements with households were 'peddling the rubbish of the capitalist class' (p. 269)) than objective economic argument. Such a response no doubt helps explain the widespread resistance to similar policies in 1979. An interesting *contrast* is that whereas in 1959, support for household contracts was linked to the 'demands of a group of prosperous middle peasants' (p. 274), some twenty years later, it was precisely the ability of such arrangements to encourage *poorer* farmers that was commended.

In their preface, the authors of this volume make clear their pedagogical aim in making available this collection of translations. The authors' claim is unnecessarily modest. It is hard to believe that there is any scholar who will not benefit from the rich and diverse collection of materials translated here. The untimely death of Kenneth Walker must—tragically—prevent the second volume from appearing in its intended format. One can only hope that his co-author will find other means of completing what so patently is a valuable and worthwhile project.

ROBERT ASH

FRANK DIKÖTTER: *The discourse of race in modern China*. xiv, 251 pp., 5 plates. London: Hurst & Co., 1992. £18.50.

Racism, said the Maoists in the 1960s, is a class problem and, in a world ruled by white imperialists, the province of Westerners, who use it to keep the coloured races down. Many Western liberals, mainly from a sense of post-colonial guilt but also as a result of ethnocentric narcissism, go along with this view of racism as exclusively white. Yet, says Frank Dikötter, racial discourse is not peculiar to white societies but thrives elsewhere too, including in China.

Dikötter's method is that of the anthropological historian. He views race as a social or cultural construct, wholly lacking in scientific validity, of phenotypical variation. Though his

main concern is with the discourse of China's educated few, he surmises a high degree of fit between it and folk views.

His first chapter dissects the construct of race in 'traditional' China, meaning the period from antiquity to the early nineteenth century (itself a 'construct' strangely out of place in a study designed to demolish thought-inhibiting abstractions). He shows how China's pre-modern élite valued whiteness (identified as the Chinese skin colour), equated blackness with slavery, and perceived Europeans as ash-white, a teratological condition 'cold and dull as the ash of frogs'. Some went even further, rejecting the Chinese élite's cultural universalism and propounding instead a categorical distinction (akin to racism) between Chinese and barbarians.

Dikötter goes on to examine the establishment in the nineteenth century of new racial stereotypes. He shows how the perception by Chinese of a threat from the West to their symbolic universe led to the 'conceptual liquidation', by a process of dehumanization and diabolization, of the European threateners. Research on ethnicization suggests that the invention of identities can generate intense hostility toward outgroups. The Chinese élite's construction of a new collective identity under conditions of national crisis around the turn of the century generated a special anxiety and anger.

Dikötter explains the development of China's new symbolic universe as a complex interaction between endogenous and foreign thinking. As an anthropologist, he stresses the active nature of cultural borrowing. In the field of racial consciousness, China's first cultural borrower was the translator Yan Fu, whose paraphrastic renderings, deeply imbued with Yan's own prejudices and concerns, of Western writing were more a form of cultural interpretation than of translation. Yan's construction of China's modern racial discourse, which abandoned the old idea of (Chinese) centre and (barbarian) periphery for a 'new spatial structure' defined by race, was similarly hybrid. His espousing of racial relativism was a radical challenge to the sinocentric universalism of China's conservative élite. Although Yan and others presented the yellow race as a natural given, in reality it was an artificial and highly elastic construct whose terms of reference widened and narrowed as required by political interest, even (in 1898) extending briefly to include the Filipinos.

In the twentieth century, the greater nationalism of reformers like Yan Fu, which encompassed all the empire's yellows, gave way to the more restricted nationalism of China's modern revolutionaries, who aspired to a state of the Han, supposedly a race of great antiquity. Dikötter shows that the main endogenous reference of these revolutionaries, often called 'social Darwinists', was not Darwinism but the Lamarckian theory of the inheritance of acquired characteristics, with its implication (congenial to the radicals) of unilinear progress. But all Western thinking, Lamarck's included, was beggared and mangled beyond recognition in the process of absorption.

Proponents of China's new discourse of race, made respectable by the academy after 1911, invented their own typology of races in the

course of deconstructing Western theories. Hair, not skin, was the main element in their new pseudo-scientific racial taxonomy; phrenology was dropped, craniology excited little interest. The new racism found few Chinese critics; its prejudices became commonplace.

This short, powerful, luminous book, a model of taut argument and relentless logic, draws on a formidable breadth of scholarship. Dikötter has apparently read everything in every language in every sort of publication in every relevant field, and uses it with masterly selectivity. His writing style is concise, elegant, and dense, lit by flashes of dry humour.

As a pioneer in the field of non-Western racism, Dikötter requests criticisms of his book. I offer two. (1) I suspect that China's racial discourse drew, more than Dikötter knows, on Japanese racial thinking, including Western racial concepts nativized in Japan (just as Tokugawa Japanese had earlier accommodated sinocentric moral culture to indigenous values and political needs). A comparative study of Chinese and Japanese racial thinking was until recently unthinkable; this book, together with forthcoming studies on racism in Japan, will permit new explorations of the dynamic interaction of racial discourse in the two countries. (2) While Dikötter is right to argue that Western racism is more virulent than Chinese racism, his view that it is also more widespread will remain unproven until serious studies are done on China's popular racial discourse. Historically, racism and ethnocentrism seem from the evidence in this book to have been conceptually less fragile in China than in the West, where they were softened by the medieval idea of a three-part world, the belief in monogenism (as opposed to China's polygenism), and an interest in seeking biological continuities (as opposed to the Chinese obsession with racial categorization). Virtually no one in China challenged the racial theories propagated in the 1930s; eugenics retained its popularity in China even after 1945 and continues to do so under the Communists today, despite its widespread discrediting elsewhere after the Holocaust. True, racism was never institutionalized in China as it has been in the West, but in Tibet today, Han-Chinese administrators scarcely scruple at a policy bordering on genocide. Even China's liberal and radical dissidents apparently dissent little from official policy, which veers between paternalism and persecution, on 'national minorities'.

GREGOR BENTON

**BILL BRUGGER and DAVID KELLY:**  
*Chinese Marxism in the post-Mao era.* xii, 223 pp. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990. \$32.50.

This book, dedicated to the victims of the Beijing massacre, was actually written before June 4th, 1989, and the debates it analyses took place in an intellectual environment—the years 1979–86—which no longer exists in China today. To the average reader, these Marxist theoretical, and occasionally philosophical discussions will seem quite far removed from