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The Chinese race-nation

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China's patronage of some developing African states gave Maoism the look of a cosmopolitan doctrine, and for a time distracted attention from the racial discrimination which affects the behaviour of Chinese people as much as anyone else's. But the fact that the Chinese have espoused no doctrine of classification as obviously different from the European as the caste system of India should not delude us into assuming without question that their sense of ethnicity and race is the same as ours.

Nationalism and its states in their dissemination across the globe have promoted territorial definitions of ethnicity. Nationalism has fostered a sense of the world divided into territories of primordial belongings. It has also, I would argue, formed our very concepts of culture and ethnicity, as well as the concept of 'race'. But the concepts of culture and ethnicity have changed further with a continuing transformation of the discourse of human sciences. They are no longer concepts of totalities or essences. Ethnocentrism is universal, so psychologists and human biologists claim. But ethnicities are now seen as shifting fields of meaning, active in differentiation but corresponding to no external social totality. So, have Chinese senses of belonging been changed out of recognition by the spread of nationalism to China? And what is the 'Chinese' ethnicity which received nationalism?

Is 'China' just chopsticks and the 'hundred names' (*lao bai xing*) of the common people? We should certainly add the writing by means of which households and names are traced as lines and local descent groups – for which the ideograph is pronounced *zu*. That character (graph and sound image) was extended to all the lines which are 'China' by a translation of 'race' as *minzu*, and 'nation' was given an identical translation. Is the racism which elaborates on *minzu* the same as the European discourse from which it is translated? These and other questions are provoked by Frank Dikötter's thoughtful and original book *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (Hurst, £18.50).

A territorially based marker we can call 'Chinese' can be traced back, through its name and content changes, to the oracle bone inscriptions of the Shang and Xia rulers three to four thousand years ago. But ethnicity as we normally define it must be more than a distinction between humans and others. Early Chinese cosmologies did divide an Us from 'cooked' barbarians and these again from the 'raw', and gave them different colours, names and zones in concentric distances from the imperial capital. Such classifications were standardized with the establishing of a strong imperial state capable of detailed bureaucratic control and massive conscription from 200 BC onwards.

But no other centres of the universe were imagined. By contrast, the stuff of modern nationalism (and incidentally the idea of ethnicity and ethnocentrism) is a conception of other centricities. Such a concept came to China, according to Dikötter, only in the last 200 years, when the Chinese symbolic universe was already fragmented. *Minzu* applied to others as well as the Chinese, even though they could still be classed as wild, or – later under Stalinist Marxism – at a more or

less advanced stage of historical evolution. Dikötter's main achievement is to show how the constructs of 'race' in China were a transmutation from those understood by 'race' in the European texts that were translated or were just named as an authority by Chinese writers. But I would add, on the basis of the information in his and other histories of modern China, that these constructs were involved in a major transformation of Chinese self-identification. The new doctrine of 'race-nation' in China is unlike the old Chinese concepts of humans and of a centre of human culture. The new doctrine, in China as in Europe, is multicentred. This does not prevent Chinese, any more than it does Europeans, from deeming others to be inferior as well as different centricities. Still, the question remains whether the Chinese 'race-nation' concept has other distinctive characteristics in application and context.

The results of the absorption of the new into the old puts up a mirror to our own racism. The Euro-American anthropology of racial types placed greatest emphasis on cranial and other measurements, and on skin colour. In translation to Chinese usage, hairiness and hair form took precedence. The superior race is pure yellow with little body-hair and smooth black head-hair. The threat from the white, hairy and curly but clever European races – in which European ash-white was the obverse of the coal-black, and both were sexually unbridled – meant the former had to be beaten, the latter left to die out. The yellow peril of European racist phobias and immigration controls was turned into the peril which the yellow race faced unless it strengthened itself. Preserving and strengthening the race (*baozhong*) would turn the peril into a yellow glory. Here the word for type or seed (*zhong*), from a long-established Chinese botanical science of selection, was used, not the *zu* of lineage-nation. But it contrasts with the defence of the older centric sense, promoted by more conservative Chinese who wrote of the need to preserve teachings (*baojiao*).

Chinese familism was contrasted with Euro-American individualism. The black, the red and the brown were out of the war for world occupation. A much older association of black with slave in China absorbed every animal stereotype which the European corpus offered. Lower-class Chinese were sunburnt and stupid, but not classified as a black race. Positive eugenics, the pursuit of vigour through judicious interbreeding, was borrowed from Europe to favour the interbreeding of yellow with ash-white, but shunning the black and impure colours. A new radical elite, like that which formed in Europe, looked to a constituency of 'the people'. In China, a eugenics designed to make the elite breed faster than the mass was linked to the ancient doctrine of womb-teaching. Vigour of blood in the womb, then milk from the breast, nourished the animating substance (*jing*) of humans. But now the lower class was to be raised to the superior blood and it was no longer that of a particular line, but of the 'mass-group' (a new word, *qun*).

Racism was, as in Europe, propounded as a conscious programme of knowledge to preserve and promote a united fellowship of all classes, briefly interna-



Image of a European from a book on anthropology by Chen Yinghuang published in Shanghai in 1918, held to be an example of racial atavism and proof of degeneration. (Extra vertebrae in the sacral region have in fact been clinically recorded as an extremely rare abnormality.) From The Discourse of Race in Modern China.

tionalized by Maoism's promoting a unity of the coloured peoples against the white.

Dikötter warns readers that he is dealing only with the writings, scientific and political, of the new elite of nationalist republicans which succeeded the imperial *literati*. He makes no claim to be dealing with popular usage, nor with any other context beyond that which contains direct recourse to scientific authority or to European texts. But he is describing ruling doctrines, and they do permeate beyond elite readerships and into wider contexts. The concept of race-*seed* (*zhong*) is, I think, confined to academic discourse. But in the lessons and texts of republican schools, both Communist and Nationalist, the concept of race-nation (*minzu*) has been widely used, and schooling has become universal. In wider contexts, in and out of school, *minzu* co-exists with a number of other terms which designate 'China' in different ways. They are important for an understanding of Chinese senses of belonging. China as a country is *Zhong'guo* (literally, 'Central-country-state') while Chinese as a culture is *Hua* or *Zhong'hua*. Finally, China as a culturally identifiable descent category is *Han*. *Han* used to designate simply the central ethnicity. Now it is used to distinguish Chinese as an ethnicity from other ethnicities, including those of minorities within the borders of China the country. Overseas Chinese describe themselves as either *Hua* or *Han*, as do Chinese in China when differentiating themselves from other ethnicities. Whether they add race-nation to these identifications depends, I think, on whether they are referring to the population within the borders of *Zhong'guo*. But race-nation is, of course, a general category, and it refers within those borders either to all citizens residing in the country or to each of its ethnicities. In other words, if my understanding of these usages is correct, race-nation is not automatically attached to all the self-identifications of Chinese. When it is attached, it carries a reference both to the borders of a state with all its citizens and to an ethnicity, just as

'nation' does in English. Nevertheless, it also carries with it the peculiarly Chinese emphasis on race as mass-lineage. There seems to be in Chinese, as opposed to English, no popular usage, outside academic discourse, of a concept of 'race' distinct from nation and from ethnicity and culture.

Many social scientists and historians of China see, with hope, the emergence of a civil society, slowly in the late imperial era, faster under the Republic: a convergence with Euro-American nation-statehood and its public life. Its disruptive consequences, for instance in the first half of 1989, are countered by campaigns to stop spiritual pollution by depraved foreigners in the name of human rights. Such campaigns appeal to stability, national unity and ethnic pride. They spark off waves of xenophobia and hostility against the claims of national minorities to autonomy within the sacred sovereign territory of the Chinese.

Looking at the underside of nationalism, its racialization of ethnicity, we may see a parallel convergence – but there are historical disparities. Anti-semitism seems to have no equivalent in China. Nor is there an internal equivalent to the stratum of Black menial workers and unemployed who are so discriminated against in Europe and America. Sub-ethnic rivalries abound between different linguistic and regional identifications, but at the national level nothing like an 'underclass' can be discerned. The threat from within has no internal scapegoat population category. Instead, by a politicization of Chinese demonology, the disorder and depravity of hairy demons threaten the nation at its borders and within. Only in its border regions is further internal differentiation on racial grounds a Chinese problem. It may be that the Chinese version of race-nation, with its distinct ideas of blood, lineage and skin, is a significant, not a minor, variant of the underside of nationalism. It is more politicized, more historicized, and less separable from notions of natural identity. But it is as capable of chauvinist fervour. □

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