



**The Discourse of Race in Modern China.**

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bias of the patterns of political dominance is [fast] dissipating while the class bias [is] intensifying' (p.155).

This is a work which would have benefited from a strong editorial hand, with confusion over tenses and word usage making for difficult reading. A more significant weakness is that the book attempts to do too much. Chu seems intent on covering all bases and all possibilities, to the extent that his 'conclusions' are sometimes over-qualified and often inconclusive, particularly in the final chapter. But this does not detract greatly from this highly recommended book.

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*The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, by Frank Dikötter. Hurst & Company, London, 1992. xii, 251 pp. £18.50 (hardcover).

This book belongs to a very small minority of the academic books on China in that it relates things worth knowing and continues, page after page, to provide intellectual stimulus. It is not one of those worthy, well-intentioned books that serve up conscientiously ordered data, remark on the obvious and leave it to readers to shake out the interesting or even surprising implications of the information they convey. Frank Dikötter's book is a treat: concise, free of padding, and packed with meaningful information, interpretations and ideas on a subject that is as important as it is nearly always neglected. He writes dangerously – a welcome change from the usual caution.

Western racial attitudes to China have long been a deserving but easy object of righteous denunciation by both Chinese and foreigners. But the issue of race as thought about, discussed and acted on in China has been a subject so set about with taboos that serious treatment of it is very hard to find. Chinese historians at home and abroad tend to write as if racial thinking is a problem only when Chinese are victims, while foreigners have been inhibited by the fear of being labelled racist if they point to moles or even beams in Chinese eyes.

Dikötter busies himself with perilous issues from the outset. The dangers are not only the risks of attack from the guardians of right-thinking orthodoxy. Especially in his first chapter—an extremely cursory survey in thirty pages of attitudes to race in China from remote antiquity till near the end of the eighteenth century – he gets some things wrong. It was not wise, for example, to treat the *Shan hai jing*, that shaman's guide to spirit travel in distant realms of gods, ghosts and monsters, as if it represented late pre-Qin Chinese views of the human world beyond the territories belonging to the Warring States. Wider reading might also have persuaded Dikötter not to reject outright a piece of conventional wisdom that happens to be rather well founded: ancient and mediaeval Chinese did accept that non-Chinese living around the world of the Chinese culture could be civilized and assimilated by it. While he is right in drawing attention to the sometimes grotesque views of more distant peoples, especially those with much darker skins than most Chinese, he should not have disregarded the relative scarcity of comments on the inherited physical appearance of their closer neighbours in Chinese texts. If, for example, northern steppe-dwelling peoples tended to get a bad press it was because of their supposed bad behaviour, not because they were other than human.

The book hits its stride once the author gets past the first chapter and into terrain he knows better. The titles of sections in the next two chapters on attitudes between the late eighteenth century and 1903 sum up their contents well: demonology, teratology, anatomy, geography, typology, miscegenation, racial war, racial continuity, racial origins, racial extinction, racial classification, racial hierarchy, racial frontiers, racial amalgamation, 'Western influence'. These two chapters deal largely with views that touched on the pathological, given the shocks to the national pride of the educated classes that were inflicted in the last years of the nineteenth century and the opening ones of the twentieth.

No doubt Chinese racial notions were no worse (but no better either) than the delusions then widespread in Europe, delusions that have poisoned European history into our own times. As Dikötter's account moves into the twentieth century he uncovers no end of unsavoury evidence: 'A dredger would be needed to gather up all the racial clichés, stereotypes and images in China as well as the West during the period between the two world wars' (p.149). China was not behind Europe when it came to ranking 'races' from superior to inferior and in taking skin colour as the most obvious criterion for distinguishing between them. Nor did it lack for advocates of eugenics who admired the Nazi approach to improving the quality of the nation through controlled breeding, a subject explored in this fascinating book's penultimate chapter. Unfortunately the study ends nearly half a century ago, apart from a very short epilogue. Is it too much to hope that Dikötter will bring his study closer to the present in a sequel or in a chapter or two added to future editions? Racial attitudes in the People's Republic, Taiwan and Hong Kong are a much richer mixture of absurdities than his epilogue suggests, and well worth as much, if not more, attention as the nineteenth century.

It may well be that this book will, by opening up serious discussion of this difficult but vital subject, have its findings and arguments modified by later writers in a way that a narrower study would not. That will be confirmation of its pioneering importance. Meanwhile, it will reward the attention of all China specialists with pleasure as well as enlightenment.

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*China and the Chinese Overseas*, by Wang Gungwu. Times Academic Press, Singapore, 1991. viii, 312 pp., note about the author, preface, chronological table of China's dynasties, index.

How wonderful to see another collection of Professor Wang's work. The book complements *Community and Nation: Essays on Southeast Asia and the China* – an earlier selection edited by Anthony Reid for the Asian Studies Association of Australia – and provides yet another occasion to celebrate Wang Gungwu's contribution to China studies.

Now Vice-Chancellor of the University of Hong Kong and previously Head of the Department of Far Eastern History at the Australian National University, Professor Wang began his career at the University of Malaya, where he developed an internationally-recognized expertise on China's relationship with the Nanyang, especially during the Ming period. Over the years, this has expanded to include the