
**Walter Demel**

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Inspired by some smaller studies of the 1990s, the author presents the first comprehensive study on European or ‘Western’ perceptions of Asians and, later, exclusively East Asians. In doing so, however, he reasonably concedes that he can only offer a “short history” of this topic. Since about 1800, East Asians have been considered as members of a ‘yellow’, ‘Mongolian Race’. The question of how this came about is the starting point of his book. In his introduction he demonstrates that after 1800 the three faces of the devil in Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, like the mural paintings of different peoples in old Egyptian tombs, were interpreted as representations of ancient ‘racial thinking’. This shows that this way of thinking was already firmly established in the nineteenth century.

For the period until the eighteenth century, however, I think that the author exaggerates the relevance of skin colour and the negative connotations of ‘black’. Coloured Christian saints, such as St. Maurice, are an obvious contrary example. In chapter 1 (“Before They Were Yellow”), it seems remarkable that he stresses occasional remarks that East Asians were ‘not quite as white as Europeans’ (pp. 38-39), yet neglects comments from important authors (A. Semedo, J.-B. Du Halde), who state exactly the opposite. Basically, it is questionable for these centuries to assume that a general feeling of superiority among Europeans existed with regard to the inhabitants of all other continents—Asia in particular. I even doubt that the arrangement of skulls in Blumenbach’s depiction and his statements about ‘degeneration’ must necessarily be interpreted as conveying a ‘hierarchy of races’ (pp. 17, 62-63). In chapter 2 (“Taxonomies of Yellow”), a deeper investigation of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach’s concept of ‘degeneration’ might have led to different conclusions.

In other respects, however, the main achievement of the book and especially of this second chapter lies in the semantic observations of the
author—a professor at the Department of Foreign Languages at National Taiwan University—e.g. in his analyses of the various meanings of the Latin terms ‘luridus’ and ‘fuscus’ (pp. 51-57). He succeeds in showing how colour denominations multiplied when the attempts to characterize East Asian skin colours were translated into other European languages. One might even ask whether, for instance, Latin ‘flavus’, English ‘yellow’, French ‘jaune’ etc. represent the same shade of the colour range, and whether they did so in the same way in the sixteenth century as they do in the twenty-first century.

In chapter 3 (“Nineteenth Century Anthropology and the Measurement of ‘Mongolian’ Skin Color”), Keevak starts with the insight that, in the first half of the nineteenth century, three main races—‘white Caucasians’, ‘yellow Mongolians’ and ‘black Ethiopians’—were increasingly distinguished, and that the term ‘Tatar’ was given up in favour of ‘Mongolian’. ‘True Tatars’, Keevak finds out, were now counted among the ‘Caucasians’. Then, he tries to answer the question of why the ‘Yellow Race’ has been described as ‘Mongolian’ since Blumenbach’s third edition of De varietate … (1795). He asserts that P. S. Pallas had used the term ‘Mongolian’ as an overall notion for all Siberian peoples. C. Meiners then extended the concept to all ‘Non-Caucasians’, and lastly Blumenbach reduced it to North and East Asians. This description of the process is rather imprecise, as I will show in the above-mentioned anthology. At any rate, it is problematic to assume that ‘Mongolian’ implied ‘notions of a nomadic, powerful, barbarous, and invading race’ (p. 77), at least if this is meant to indicate that Blumenbach made this choice exactly because of these connotations. Apart from the fact—mentioned by the author himself—that the wild conquerors from the East were traditionally named ‘Ta(r)tars’, documents from the Göttingen archives reveal a somewhat different reason. Better founded, however, and rather interesting are Keevak’s studies of the obsession with quantification, beginning with the measurement of skulls, and extending, after 1850, to attempts to identify precisely the skin colour of every imaginable group of men by using colour tables, colour tops and, since the 1920s, coloured light. He shows that the ways of measuring of yellow (and red) shades proved particularly thorny. Nevertheless, the established idea that East Asians had to be yellow was not shaken.

The short chapter 4, “East Asian Bodies in Nineteenth-Century Medicine”, is dedicated to allegedly East Asian peculiarities: the ‘Mongolian Eye’, the ‘Mongolian Spot’ and ‘Mongolism’. In this context, as Keevak shows, the idea that ‘Mongolians’ were a transitional race between Caucasians and Ethiopians was consolidated. And, once again, presumed scientific certainties could not be unseated by facts: apparently the ‘Mongolian Spot’, widespread among peoples in the world and described for the first time in Japan, is lacking just among ‘Mongolians’ in the strict sense of the
name. Nevertheless, the ‘Mongolian Race’ was considered a homogeneous unity, and, especially after 1895, as a genuine “Yellow Peril”, as chapter 5 is entitled. More original than Keevak’s interpretation of the often described painting of that name ordered by Wilhelm II is his sub-chapter on the reception of the image of ‘yellow’ as a skin colour in East Asia. In China, the adoption of Western racial ideas was probably facilitated by traditional positive connotations of yellow and the concept of the ‘Sons of the Yellow Emperor’ directed against the foreign rule of the Manchu dynasty—even though, on the first official flag of the Chinese Republic, a yellow stripe represented just these Manchus and a red one the ‘Han people’! Among Japanese, however, the idea of being a member of a ‘Yellow Race’ met with more intense resistance. Many Japanese wanted to be regarded as ‘Whites’, whereas Western observers after 1854 usually at best conceded a certain rapprochement to their own supposed ‘whiteness’ to them.

The many authors who have dealt with the origins and development of the catchword ‘Yellow Peril’ since 1957 are mentioned in footnote 3 on page 170, as are the relevant studies of Rotem Kowner, David Mungello and this reviewer in the introduction (p. 3). But these names hardly ever reappear in the footnotes! Instead, Keevak quotes sources that these and other authors discovered and interpreted without mentioning them, and he almost always only quotes the original documents. It is fine for him to correct former research results from time to time, oppose new theses to older ones, or confirm the latter, but he should make clear what previous research has already detected (and who did this), which points he wants to oppose, and where he himself has achieved new findings or formulated new theses. To put it in a nutshell, the originality of the book is decidedly less than the author indirectly claims. For that reason, I cannot share the effusive enthusiasm some American colleagues exhibit on the dust-cover blurb, though undoubtedly the book has its merits.