

Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking by Michael Keevak. Princeton University Press, 2011, 248 pages. ISBN: 9780691140315, Hardback, £24.95

Robert Brown*
University of Birmingham

Since Said's famous work *Orientalism* (1978), historians of British imperial culture have increasingly taken a firm post-colonial interpretative stance in their exploration of the European cultural construction of the 'Orient'. Attached to the broader study of the penetration and physical conquest of the non-white world, significant attention has now been paid to the role of nineteenth century racial science and pseudo-scientific practices as a buttress to white supremacy in both colony and metropole.²³² Though historians such as Rotem Kowner have looked at racial constructions of the Japanese, attempts to trace the development of racial images of East Asians over the *longue durée* have often lacked nuance.²³³ This is a niche that Michael Keevak's eclectic work seeks to occupy in its exploration of the complex development of colonial powers' haphazard racialization of East Asians.

The broad sweep of Keevak's approach attempts to trace the ways in which the discourse on East Asian behaviour and appearance, particularly skin colour, ebbed and flowed in often contradictory fashion, from descriptions in works such as *Dante's Inferno* until the latter half of the twentieth century. In plotting his narrative thread, he suggests that the description of East Asians as 'yellow' did not crystallise until the work of nineteenth-century racial scientists found unprecedented centrality. In addition the study explores not only the idea that European perceptions of the Chinese and Japanese were fluid and far from monolithic, but that these East Asian societies in fact played an important role in either influencing, endorsing or contesting western racial classifications. Racialisation, he therefore claims, was hardly a one-way street.²³⁴

* Robert Brown is a doctoral research student at the University of Birmingham examining the 'yellow peril' trope in British Imperial culture, and the evolution of the discourse over the *longue durée*, between the late 19th century and the outbreak of the Pacific war. He can be contacted at rwb635@bham.ac.uk

²³² Key works in this field include: Kenan Malik, *The meaning of race: race, history and culture in Western society*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1996). Daniel J. Kevles, *In the name of eugenics: genetics and the uses of human heredity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1st. ed, 1995). Greta Jones, *Social Darwinism and English thought: the interaction between biological and social theory*, (Brighton: Harvester, 1980). Gavin Schaffer, *Racial science and British society, 1930-62*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Elazar Barkan, *The retreat of scientific racism: changing concepts of race in Britain and the United States between the world wars*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

²³³ See Rotem Kowner, 'Lighter than Yellow, but not Enough': Western Discourse on the Japanese 'Race', 1854-1904, *The Historical Journal* 43 (2000), pp. 103-131.

²³⁴ As Keevak states at greater length, "Trying to trace any straightforward development of the concept of yellowness is full of dead ends...like most other forms of racial stereotyping, it cannot be reduced to a simple chronology and was the product of often vague and confusing notions about physical difference, heritage, and ethnological specificity", (p.15)

The author embraces a rich range of sources, utilising works of European racial science and travel writing, covering a huge geographical and chronological vista that takes us from the art of Ancient Egypt to Kaiser Wilhelm II's invocation of the 'yellow peril'. Although the author makes an early disclaimer that a need for brevity has prevented an exploration of racial perceptions in imperial culture, the work is unbalanced by its omission of popular discourses, such as the dissemination of images and constructs through print media and popular fiction. The interaction between intellectual and popular discourse has proven heavily important even before John Mackenzie, with the ground-breaking work of Jean-Pierre Lehman, *The Image of Japan* (1978) proving that when looking at western imagining of an East Asian nation, the very public way in which elite agendas are consumed or contested must be recognised. Additionally Ariane Knüsel's more contemporary study of the mutating image of China in Britain, America and Switzerland has revealed that approaching transnational media discourse is highly necessary, although such a model would be difficult to achieve in the earlier stretches of this work's chronology.²³⁵ As such it could be argued that Keevak's work has a somewhat elite focus. However the marshalling of a range of sources and summarising of such a disparate and contradictory discourse into a tight and concise narrative enables both beginners and academics to grasp the basic essence of the process by which racial thinking is constructed.

In the first chapter, it is postulated that in 'premodern' European travel writing and the reports of traders and missionaries, the peoples of East Asia were generally described as being 'white'. Marco Polo at the end of the 1200s indeed attributed whiteness to the people of both China and Japan. Although these colour definitions often fluctuated over the following centuries, Keevak argues that this still does not explain why East Asians were eventually 'coloured' yellow by Europeans. However, in chapter two, he cites the gradual construction of the 'Mongolian' type as a definition of Asianness in the eighteenth century by the anatomist Johan Blumenbach. By claiming that the shape of Mongolians skulls 'differed markedly from the Caucasian 'norm'' Blumenbach helped establish a stronger discourse of physical difference which gradually became allied to the 'generalised idea of yellowness' in nineteenth-century physical anthropology (p. 69).

In his third chapter, Keevak charts the process by which scientists, anatomists, anthropologists, and phrenologists devised complex colour tables and other measurements that more firmly established the 'yellowness' of East Asians by the 1870s. The linkage in chapter four of disorders such as Downs syndrome with the 'mongol' type, gave the stereotype of white physical superiority and eastern inferiority a 'supposedly scientifically validated literalness' (p. 62). This conveniently distanced the masculine, imperial Caucasian physique from the seemingly 'defective' bodies of the 'infantile' Far East.²³⁶

However, Keevak suggests that 'Western Orientalist attitudes' only fully awakened from indifference and came to a consensus on the idea of East Asian 'yellowness' when that region became recognised as an emerging threat to colonial dominance (p.124). Indeed, demonstrations of Chinese and Japanese military capability and effectiveness, such as the Sino-Japanese War (1894-5),

²³⁵ Ariane Knüsel, *Framing China: Media Images and Political Debates in Britain, the USA and Switzerland, 1900-1950*, (Ashgate, 2012)

²³⁶ Keevak suggests that this movement in medical thought resonated with the vogue concept of physical degeneration that blossomed under the 'New Imperialism', "*Physicians...regularly described East Asians as having yellow bodies, but 'Mongolian' conditions could be linked to physiological degeneration and play into even older clichés about the static, infantile, imitative Far East*", (p.62)

The Boxer War in China (1898-1900) and Russo-Japanese War (1904-5) arguably did place the threat of East Asia firmly at the forefront of official and popular consciousness. In the spectre of the 'yellow peril', contemporary anxieties surrounding 'oriental' migration into the European colonies and 'Western communities', combined with the image of the 'Mongolian' invasions of medieval nightmare, meant that the 'need to racialize had become stronger than ever' (p. 125).

Keevak also explores how racial classification was configured in East Asia. In China, yellow was the colour of the yellow river and the yellow emperor (p. 126), and although colour was used more to denote levels of civilisation than race in the western pseudo-scientific guise these ideas played a role in the re-invocation and shaping of Chinese identity. In Japan, 'yellowness' was contested far more vigorously than in China since it did not share these historical connotations. Commentators such as Meiji historian Ukichi Taguchi (1904) stressed that the Japanese were somehow distinctly 'less yellow', and therefore occupied a higher seat in the hierarchical stratum of 'races', in comparison to their Chinese counterparts.²³⁷

The book succeeds in highlighting the fluidity of scientific discourse, and the way in which social or colonial imperatives had a complex, mutually reinforcing influence on racial thinking. Where the argument is particularly interesting is in relation to the 'yellow peril' construction of the late nineteenth century, as the previous scientific establishment of racial difference was now employed to configure East Asians as more 'yellow' and more of a threat than ever before. The *longue durée* approach is also welcome, as Keevak is able to link these constructions of science and imperialism back to vague medieval fantasies of annihilation at the hands of the Mongols, a popular reference point to which the reader can relate.

Keevak concludes then that the process of creating a racial category was far less straightforward and teleological than has previously been suggested. This powerful yet compact work will prove valuable not only as an introduction and exploration of racial profiling via pseudo-science, but also as a cross-disciplinary bridge through which others such as anthropologists and medical academics can approach historical questions. The work certainly leaves plenty of room for a further consideration of the way that this informs and reflects popular discourses through a wider and even more eclectic source base.

²³⁷ This idea was also explored in Kowner 'Lighter than Yellow'.