

# Rethinking ‘race’ from Asian perspectives

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## INTRODUCTION

In continental Europe, there has been a tendency to avoid using the term ‘race’ in favor of ‘ethnicity’. In the United States, on the other hand, there is abundant literature on race – far more than that on ethnicity – and in Latin America, racism and skin pigmentation are attracting increasing attention since the strong correlation between pigmentation and socioeconomic hierarchy has been revealed (cp. for example, Telles and PERLA 2014). The usage of the terms thus varies depending on the region and its historical/social context.

Race in general is defined as a group identified by what are perceived to be physical differences. In Encyclopaedia Britannica, Peter Wade writes, “What most definitions have in common is an attempt to categorize peoples primarily by their physical differences.” The third edition of Oxford Dictionary of English, for example, defines race as “each of the major divisions of human kind, having distinct physical characteristics” (Stevenson 2010).

Such understandings of race have been developed mostly in the U.S. and Europe based on Euro-American experiences. However, as long as visible physical features are considered the primary criteria for identifying race, only minorities discriminated against on the basis of the European and American idea of race are likely to have social recognition as the victims of ‘racial discrimination’.

I consider the following characteristics as inherent in the idea of race. First, racial characteristics are believed to be ‘inherited’ from generation to generation, mediated by bodies, and thus cannot be (easily) changed. Second, there is a strong tendency for those who draw the boundary between the self and other to exclude the latter, and often to assume a hierarchy between groups. Third, since exclusion and hierarchy manifest themselves in collusion with political,

economic, and social institutions and resources, they are not limited to a consciousness of differences based on simple prejudice and ethnocentrism. That is to say, they are related to interests through institutional differentiation.

If race then includes physically invisible groups, how is it different from ethnicity? An ethnic group basically continues to construct and confirm its unity and solidarity through the awareness and imagination of sharing ‘something special’ in past historical experience, ‘culture’, or values, even though its label and category may have been mobilized in the process of modern state formation. However, though the ideas of race and ethnicity are not mutually exclusive, and may refer to the same groups, they should be distinguished as analytical concepts.

I argue that the idea of race is neither a modern Western product, nor a universal phenomenon. My thesis claims that when we abstract the highest common factors from the various phenomena constituting the idea of race, we can identify three dimensions, which I call *race*, *Race*, and *RR* (Race as Resistance) respectively. In the following, I will discuss these three dimensions of the idea of race based on Asian perspectives. I can provide only a small number of examples due to limited space. However, the model may be applied to rethinking race on a global level (Takezawa 2011).

## RACE IN THE LOWER CASE SENSE

What I refer to as *race* (with a lower-case ‘r’) indicates cases where differences observed in a particular society between socially differentiated groups are understood to be inherited over generations and cannot be changed (or easily changed) by the environment. These differences are represented in political, economic and social institutions accompanied by a clear hierarchy, and manifest an exclusive nature. *race* in the lower-case sense does not exist in human society across all time and space, and can only occur in contexts where social stratification has developed to a certain extent.

Examples of *race* in this sense include the Pakejong in Korea (Kim 2013); the slavery system of the Toba Batak of Southeast Asia (Reid 1983); the Micronesian low caste, whose members engage in ‘polluted’ work and cannot own land (Chappell 1998); the socially low-status Milingai of Yap island, who are ‘impure’ and also cannot own land (Ushijima 1987); the Irish from the viewpoint of the English; and the Jews and the Roma in various parts in Europe.

Let us take the example of the Burakumin in Japan. It has long been a taboo to consider the Burakumin in terms of race, but at the 2001 Durban conference,

the Buraku Liberation League and a Dalit group in unison formed a session to appeal for their rights, claiming that they have been suffering racism based on work and descent. The history of the Burakumin – a heterogeneous group – is complicated, but in brief, the group was designated as outcaste during the early modern period, and were formerly often referred to as *eta* (literally, ‘defilement-abundant’). Many of them were engaged in slaughtering animals and producing leather, or other work considered undesirable by the majority, while in reality their products and labor were indispensable in their society, especially for the rulers (for Buraku issues, cp. for example, Amos 2011; The Buraku Liberation and Human Rights Research Institute 1998).

In Japan, where the ideology of blood is still persistent, descent serves as a key factor constituting the idea of race as it is believed to be inherited from generation to generation. While having deep historical roots, this ideology was explicitly reconstructed after the Meiji period started in 1868, when sovereignty was transferred from the samurai to the emperor. The discourse that the emperor has sacred blood that has persisted since ancient times and represents the Japanese nation was developed, which in turn reinforced the myth that the Burakumin have polluted blood; as Jiichiro Matsumoto, a leader of the Buraku liberation movement left very famous words: “Where the High is, there is the Low”. The ‘sacred’ and the ‘polluted’ were linked through an inseparable relationship constructed around the axis of the blood ideology in the hurried nation-building process.

Scholars have agreed that there is continuity in the discourse of the alien racial origins of the Burakumin from the medieval (until the end of 16th century) to early modern (from the 17th century through the mid 19th century) and modern (since the mid 19th century) periods. There are also historical sources that indicate that discrimination was institutionalized in statutory form by the 16th century. During the Age of Civil Wars in medieval Japan (from the late 15th century through to the end of the 16th century), the contact between *eta*, who handled animal slaughtering and leather production, and the rest of the society increased due to a greater demand for leather, the raw material for the samurai panoply. In the Edo period (1603-1867), *eta* was further fixed as a status (Harada 1973).

In China, there is a group among the Yi (the name of an ethnic group recognized by the state) living in Liangshan in Sichuan province who call themselves the Nosu. Intermarriage between the high-caste *nuoho* (black) and the low caste *quho* (white), who are considered to be polluted, is avoided even today. Domestic labor slaves until the beginning of the 20th century, the *quho*

are considered to be of different descent and identifiable through outward appearance (Hill 2001).

*race* in the lower-case sense still persists in contemporary societies. Today, the targets of what E. Balibar called new racism in Europe, such as immigrants from South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, as well as migrant workers in Japan and Korea, can be understood as one form of race in the lower case.

## RACE IN THE UPPER-CASE SENSE

*Race* in the upper-case sense refers to a (quasi-) scientific concept, constructed through the mapping and classification of the people of the world. It has been believed to be possible to classify people of the world and make visual ‘specimens’, in terms of universal language and universal principles, in the name of science. For this reason, the theories proposed circulate and are accepted in many regions of the world. However, classifications do not spread to various regions of the world merely as imported concepts from the West. They have their own unique development in a specific sociopolitical context of nation-building or colonialism.

Among others, Johann F. Blumenbach (1865), who is often referred to as the Father of Anthropology, is probably most influential with his classification of human beings into five categories in the 1795 version of his thesis, but was followed by numerous scientists engaged in the classification of humans. The introduction of European theories of race in the name of science around the mid-19th century had enormous impact almost everywhere in the world. Racial classification theories became a new tool of authority for European colonizers and Asian leaders alike. To name a few: *Races of Britain* (1885) by John Beddoe (British); *Anthropologie* (1888) by Paul Topinard (French); *The Mediterranean Race: a Study of the Origin of European Peoples* (1901) by G. Sergi (Italian). By the mid-19th century, colonial Europeans were employing techniques such as ethnographic research, mapping, and census-taking to describe Asia’s various ‘races’.

Western racial characterizations spread to other parts of Asia in the latter half of the 19th century. These classifications not only justified the superior social position of European colonizers with regard to Asian subordinates but also evolved into detailed subdivisions between the colonial subjects themselves, wherein the elite characterized ‘tribes’ and other marginalized groups as ‘barbarian’ and ‘primitive’. In Japanese school textbooks during the Meiji period (1868-1912), the views of representative proponents of racial classification of

the Enlightenment period such as Blumenbach and Cuvier were repeatedly introduced (Takezawa 2015).

In colonial India the British anthropologists who conducted ethnographic research built reciprocal relationships with Indian elites and went so far as to construct a defense of the country's caste system (e.g. Risley 1891; Deniker 1900). This defense was based on the 'scientific' analysis of cranial differences between members of different castes. The findings indicated that Bengali upper castes were Aryan in origin and that the lower castes, such as foragers and pastoralists, were, under the precepts of social Darwinism, destined to die out.

From the latter half of the 19th century to the early 20th century, American society was unsettled by the debate over the abolition of slavery and the acceptance of 'unassimilable' immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe and Asia. Internal colonialism in the U.S., along with the colonialism of the British Empire in the Victorian era, provided the greatest receptacle for *Race* in the upper-case sense. Let us consider the following cases of transformation:

Samuel George Morton, known for the collection and measurement of skulls in the mid-19th century, disseminated the idea of Blumenbach's five-fold classification (Blumenbach 1865 [1775]) in America with his first book, *Crana Americana* (Morton 1839). Morton described the characteristics of each category based on Blumenbach's five-fold classification, and inserted the following note: "It will be observed, however, that the word race is substituted for variety" (ibid 1839: 5, emphasis original). In spite of Blumenbach's emphasis that clear boundaries cannot be drawn within it, Morton changed the wording from 'variety' to 'race', which implies fixity and definite difference (Brace 2005). As Stephen Jay Gould demonstrates, the differences between races, with 'whites' positioned at the top of a hierarchical system and 'blacks' at the bottom, were fabricated and exaggerated by intentional and unintentional mismeasurement (1981). As is well known, Morton's research on human skulls was adopted by defenders of slavery and of racial segregation as scientific proof of the inferiority of body, ability and character of black people in the historical context of histime.

Brazil has been historically credited as a country with little racial prejudice (e.g. Freyre 1933; Degler 1971), as miscegenation has constructed the basis of its national character (Telles 2004; Silva/Paixão 2014). However, during the period between the two World Wars, it used the idea of *Race* and Social Darwinism as a pretext for the formation and development of the nation state. The leaders of Brazil sought the answer to the question of how to become like the civilized countries of Europe in making its people 'whiter' by welcoming immigrants from Europe and restricting or excluding those from Asia and other regions (e.g. Skidmore 1990). Also in colonial Southeast Asia and India, *Race* in the upper-

case sense, which had not existed in traditional local societies, was introduced when the census began around the 1870s. While language, religion and customs had previously been employed as classificatory measures, the introduction of *Race* reorganized the system of classification, incorporating various groups such as people living in the hinterlands, who came to be called ‘tribes’ (e.g. Guha 1998; Keyes 2002).

The examples above are all from the modern period, but *Race* is also a contemporary problem in the age of the human genome. Various studies have attempted to find genes connected with propensity toward drug use, violence, and other criminal behavior, often linked to racial profiling (Ossorio/Dustor 2004). Some scientists, though by now a minority, maintain that there are meaningful biological differences between what they call races and/or between peoples in different continents (e.g. Risch et al. 2002; Jorde/Wooding 2004).

In Japan a couple of years ago a few tabloid magazines published articles about the Mayor of Osaka, Toru Hashimoto, one of the most influential politicians in Japan, and disclosed his father’s Buraku identity and his mother’s Korean identity. Later Hashimoto sued these publishers and won. Among the catchy phrases in these articles were “traces Hashimoto’s DNA”, and “identifies his blood lineage” (Shukan Asahi 2012).

All these examples show how *Race* in the upper-case sense remains deeply rooted even as it shifts its appearance in line with new scientific developments.

## RACE AS RESISTANCE (RR)

The third dimension of the idea of race is *Race as Resistance*, or *RR*. The subjectivity of the racialized groups is often awakened in the proactive resistance of race/Race, and is realigned through solidarity. *Race as resistance*, a concept with newly positive meanings, is constructed as a result. There are many forms of *RR*. Some appear as an inverse of race/ Race, and others emphasize identity politics. *RR* indicates the use of race as a discursive strategy to expose existing (or contemporary) racial discrimination, to refuse assimilation promoted by mainstream society, and to put identity politics into operation. In such contexts, racial identity is consciously employed despite its being complicated in reality by the existence of several multilayered and plural identities.

When W. E. B. DuBois organized the first Pan African Congress in 1900 in London, he was already aware that the construction of what is today called transnational African solidarity was a key to progress in rectifying discrimination against people of African descent. There, he made a famous

speech calling for whites to give up the rule which had led to European expansionism. Pan Africanism, with DuBois at the head, became a major movement after World War I aimed at a kind of transnational *RR*. Resistance by non-whites against white rule is another domain of *RR*. Early international organizations run by non-whites as resistance against whites included the Pan African Congress (1900, 1919, 1921, 1923, 1927, 1945) and the Universal Races Congress (1911), while in the scientific field there was the academic argument by the Boas school against the theory of biological superiority of the white race (Preiswerk 1970).

*Race as resistance* to white hegemony also developed in East Asia at the beginning of the 20th century. The 'Yellow Race' began to be perceived as a threat to 'White civilized countries', particularly after Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05. Resistance to the mounting European invasion of China and other parts of Asia, and Euro-American racism toward the burgeoning Asian population, grew and intensified. The notion of the 'Yellow Peril' had spread sensationalistically throughout the West Coast region of the U.S., and the exclusion of Japanese immigrants was intensified after the Japanese victory in the Russo-Japanese War. Japan took the establishment of a succession of racist laws, mainly targeting Japanese immigrants on the West Coast, very seriously, and tried to denounce racism in the U.S. by putting the problem of the exclusion of Japanese immigrants on the international agenda. However, Japan's hope to include the article for abolition of racial discrimination at the peace conference at Versailles after World War I (1919) did not materialize due to strong opposition from the U.S. and its allies. This was a most important turning point for Japan. Having experienced a great setback, it abandoned the ideology of leaving Asia and joining Europe. Later, as is well known, it moved instead towards the plan of the Great East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere on the pretext of securing the natural resources of the southern seas.

In the period following World War II, as Asian countries embarked on a course of nation-building, perceptions of race have played essential roles in defining their national identities and shaping their external relations, particularly with Europe and America. The advancement of Westernization and the strong presence of U.S. military bases in Asia have significantly affected aesthetic ideals among Asian peoples (Glenn 2009). In different regions of contemporary Asia, lighter skin and other phenotypes that are traditionally considered traits of Europeans are now regarded as more desirable.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The three dimensions of the idea of race discussed above are linked with one another, and one dimension is able to change into another according to social conditions. Even if *RR* is sometimes seen as a threat to social integration, and some advocate a ‘color blind’ society in which racial frameworks do not exist, at least at the institutional level there will be always difficulties as long as *Race* in the upper-case and *race* in the lower-case sense are not socially resolved. *RR* has also become a powerful conceptual tool for identifying racism, and for the identity politics of minorities. As long as essentialism based on *race* and *Race* does not disappear, it remains a concept indispensable for understanding the politics of anti-discrimination struggles.

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