

Special Report: China in denial about its race problem

Written by George E. Curry, NNPA Editor-in-Chief
Tuesday, 19 March 2013 11:53



(THIRD IN A SERIES)

BEIJING (NNPA) – In absolute numbers, China probably has more beautiful women than any other country in the world. But one could never tell that by looking at the squeaky-clean glass display windows in upscale stores in this capital city or in Shanghai, whose architecture has been often compared to London, Paris and Rio.

The classic image of beauty in those stores and elsewhere across China are modeled after the American and European standard of beauty – White, blue-eyed and blond.

That's remarkable in a country that has long considered itself the center of the universe.

"From the most ancient times, the Chinese chose to call themselves white, with a light complexion highly valued and likened to white jade," Martin Jacques wrote in *When China Rules the World*

"By the beginning of the twelfth century, the elite attached a heightened meaning to being white, with colour consciousness amongst the elite sensitized by the maritime contacts established during the Southern Song dynasty (AD 1127-1279).

"During this period even the newly popular Buddha was converted from a 'swart half-naked Indian to a more decently clad divinity with a properly light complexion,' rather as Jesus was whitened in the Western Christian tradition."

Sun Yat-sen, who led the revolution to overthrow the Qing dynasty in 1911, had a clear-cut view on race.

"Mankind is divided into five races," he said. "The yellow and white races are relatively strong and intelligent. Because the other races are feeble and stupid, they are being exterminated by the white race. Only the yellow race competes with the white race. This is so-called evolution among the contemporary races that could be called superior, there are only the yellow and white races. China belongs to the yellow race."

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In both old and new China, whiteness – or proximity to it – is prized.

"In the Chinas today there is a clear racial social hierarchy based on the assumption of racial superiority," wrote M. Dujon Johnson, author of *Race & Racism in the Chinas: Chinese Racial Attitudes Toward Africans and African-Americans*

"The comfort level and the acceptance of a foreigner in the Chinas are directly proportional to the skin pigmentation of that non-Chinese."

Interestingly, that hasn't always been the case, according to Johnson.

"In traditional Chinese opera one who had a black face or darker skin features indicated either a rough, bold or noble character and a person of courage, righteousness and incorruptibility, or an impartial and selfless personality," he wrote.

"The noted jurist during the Ming Dynasty, Bao Zheng (999-1062), was known for his dark complexion and black face and is a symbol of justice, fair play, incorruptibility in Chinese history.

"In contrast a white face in Chinese opera meant a perfect villain. The color white is the trait that highlights all that is bad in human nature: cunning, craftiness, deceit and treachery."

Now, that's been flipped.

"At some point in modern Chinese history the view of blackness, Africans and other dark skinned people changed from a positive or indifferent view to a negative and vociferous one," Johnson wrote.

He argues that rather than having a genuine dislike of African Americans, Chinese, like people around the world, were heavily influenced by westerners "who have transferred their negative racial views and perceptions of people of color to the Chinese."

Unlike the U.S., where racial views are openly discussed – though not always with civility – there is little discussion of race in China. Zhao Ziyang, then-general secretary of the Communist Party, provided a possible rationale in 1988 when he said at a national meeting on unity that racial discrimination was common "everywhere in the world except China."

Acknowledged or not, racial discrimination is indeed a problem in China that manifests itself in strange and sometimes unique ways.

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