

Book Review

Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking, by Michael Keevak. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Reviewed by **Bo Tao**, Institute for Excellence in Educational Innovation, Chiba University, Chiba, Japan, E-mail: taobo123@gmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5041-2319>

<https://doi.org/10.1515/jciea-2022-0003>

“Yellow peril” is a term charged with a myriad of racial, cultural, religious and moral connotations. A phrase with a fraught history, it has long been used to refer to the perceived threat posed by Asian people, either individually or as a whole, reflecting insidious stereotypes about Asians as being physically weak (or intimidating, depending on the context), diseased, malicious, or culturally backward. The influence of this term can still be felt today when, in the early days of the current pandemic, certain Western observers called COVID-19 the new “yellow peril,” due to the virus’s supposed origin in China. But why “yellow”? How did Asians—and in particular, East Asians—come to be associated with the color yellow in the popular imagination?

This is the central question that informs Michael Keevak’s concise, yet highly illuminating study on the history of racial thinking. A professor in the Department of Foreign Languages at Taiwan University, Keevak is an historian whose scholarship has examined the vagaries of cross-cultural encounters between Europe and East Asia in the early modern period. His previous works include *Pretended Asian* (2004), which tells the story of George Psalmanazar, a white Frenchman who falsely claimed to be the first native of “Formosa” (Taiwan) to visit Europe; and *The Story of a Stele* (2008), which explores the Western reception of the Tang dynasty-era Nestorian monument in Xi’an that was rediscovered in 1625, and its implications for European conceptions of its own perceived cultural superiority vis-à-vis China.

According to his acknowledgments, Keevak developed this project over the course of two separate research stays in Princeton, New Jersey: first as a scholar at the Institute for Advanced Study in 2007, and second as a visiting fellow in the Department of History at Princeton University in 2009. Making extensive use of the library resources available to him at both Princeton and IAS, Keevak paints a vivid and revealing picture of the relatively recent invention of yellowness in the Western imagination. His primary sources range from the travelogues of merchants and missionaries to the scientific volumes of prominent taxonomers and anthropologists whose works have had a profound influence on how we have to come to think of racial difference in the modern world.

In chapter 1, Keevak begins his study by examining pre-eighteenth century travel accounts by missionaries and other European visitors to China and Japan. In doing so, he shows, quite interestingly, that there was little consensus as to the way in which East Asians were depicted. Indeed, he quotes many instances in which the narrator described their subjects as “white,” rather than “yellow.” For example, Marco Polo, at the end of the twelfth century, referred both to the people of China and Japan as “white” (*bianca*). Others, such as Friar Odoric in the 1330s, spoke of the Chinese as “good looking” (*di corpo belli*), although those in southern China were said to be “pallid” (*pallidi*). Lacking the systematic desire to classify peoples into what we now call race, Western travelers in the premodern era used color to connote in their subjects something else entirely: their level of affluence, cultural sophistication, and religious potential—i.e. likelihood to convert to Christianity. Keevak thus comes to the intriguing conclusion that at the dawn of the European “age of exploration,” East Asian peoples were largely seen as white, and only occasionally yellow.

Where, then, did the idea of yellowness come from? To answer this question, Keevak delves into the world of natural science in chapter 2. He begins his examination with Francois Bernier—a French physician who had spent 12 years in the Mughal court in India—whose 1684 “New Division of the Earth, According to the Different Species of Man that Inhabit it” is seen as the first to propose a classification of humans into distinct races with accompanying color schemes. Bernier’s classification, however, did not yet match what would later become the accepted racial categories; he also applied the designation of yellow to the inhabitants of India, rather than East Asia. The discussion then turns to the famous Swedish botanist, taxonomer, and physician Carl Linnaeus. Best known as the father of the modern system of binomial nomenclature for organisms, Linnaeus’s 1735 *Systema Naturae* placed the genus *Homo* at the top of the table representing the animal kingdom, and further subdivided humans into four “species,” to which he assigned respective geographical designations as well as colors in a spectrum ranging from white to black: “Europaeus albesc. / Americanus rubesc. / Asiaticus fuscus / Africanus nigr.” (p. 49). *Fuscus*, used to describe the Asiatic “species,” however, was a vague term that could be translated as anything from “brown” to “dark” or “swarthy.” This descriptor evolved, in subsequent editions of Linnaeus’s taxonomy, from *fuscus*, to *luridus* (pale yellow), to a different scheme altogether by the time of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach: a German physician, naturalist, and anthropologist who introduced a new system of classification based on physical characteristics.

According to an important 1795 work by Blumenbach—who becomes a central figure in Keevak’s study—humans could be categorized into five races according to their comparative anatomical and facial features: “Caucasian,”

“Mongolian,” “Malayan,” “Ethiopian,” and “American.” While Blumenbach did attach the appellation *gilvus* (pale yellow) to the Mongolian type (roughly equivalent to Asians), his most lasting contribution was his invention of this brand new racial type itself. The notion of the “Mongolian”—which, along with the “Ethiopian,” were placed at the furthest remove from the “Caucasian”—would prove to have a great impact on the subsequent colorization of Asians in popular discourse.

Chapter 3 takes up the measurement of the color yellow in nineteenth-century anthropology. As scientists began to accept the idea of race as rooted in permanent biological and hereditary factors (as opposed to temporary effects such as climate and cultural customs), they sought to use skin tone as a marker to visualize racial difference. Such efforts, in turn, were a reflection of the wider obsession to validate prejudices and normative claims about higher and lower forms of human civilization through the guise of science. As the image of the Mongolian had been associated with virulence and barbarism, invoking painful European memories of the invasions by Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan, anthropologists and anatomists devised numerous ways to measure and show that the yellow race was a verifiable intermediate classification that existed between white and black. While most of these methods were questionable at best, at the end of the day, their purpose was to racialize the Mongolian through colorization, and distance it from the whiteness that was reserved exclusively for Europeans.

Chapter 4 is a sort of companion piece to the previous chapter, as it examines the use of the term “Mongolian” in nineteenth-century medical discourse. According to Keevak, Western medicine attempted to strengthen the racialization of the region by adding the adjective “Mongolian” to a number of conditions thought to be linked to East Asian people—namely the “Mongolian eye fold,” “Mongolian spots,” and “Mongolian idiocy” or “Mongolism,” known today as Down syndrome. In each case, we see that longstanding prejudices about East Asian bodies crept into the supposedly objective medical characterizations of epicanthic folds, pigment spots, and childlike physiognomy. Just as was the case in comparative anthropology, medical researchers and practitioners tried to measure white Western normalcy against the physiological and pathological “defects” of the Mongolian, helping to reinforce contemporary theories of racial hierarchy and East Asians’ relatively low placement on the developmental ladder.

Keevak concludes his book in chapter 5, where the discussion finally reaches the turn of the twentieth century: the era in which the term “yellow peril” was first coined. Not only was this the period when the discourse of yellow became ubiquitous in the West, but it was also when European cultural constructions of yellow migrated to East Asia. The phrase “yellow peril” is generally credited to an

1895 original drawing by Kaiser Wilhelm II, which depicted a group of warrior women, representing the nations of Europe, being called to arms against an ominous-looking Buddha statue silhouetted with smoke, representing the Far East. Surprisingly enough, China responded to the concept of a yellow race fairly positively, as it fit in with pre-existing myths about their own civilization—yellow as the color of the earth, the central color, the official color of the emperor, and the iconic Yellow River. In contrast, the idea was met with much resistance in Japan, as they resented being lumped together with China, a perceived backward Asian nation from which they were striving to distance themselves in their rush to modernize and industrialize. In fact, many Japanese nationalists rejected the “yellow race” moniker entirely, claiming that they had much more in common with the white West than with their Asian neighbors.

Ultimately, however, the label stuck, and for much of Western Christendom, both China and Japan were seen as “yellow perils” for a number of reasons. For one, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the first time that countries like the United States encountered mass migration from East Asia, conjuring up the specter of large hordes of Asians “invading” the Western homeland. This led to a series of immigration restrictions enacted in the U.S., such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Japan’s military victory over Russia in 1905 also played into the image of the yellow race as a threat to the white man, seemingly validating Kaiser Wilhelm’s original warning. The matter was given a concrete, legal verdict in 1922, when a Supreme Court case (*Ozawa v. United States*) ruled that Japanese immigrants were “aliens ineligible for citizenship” since they were not white, and a Smithsonian anthropologist testified in Congress on the permanently “unassimilable” nature of the Japanese, who, he repeatedly asserted, were a “yellow-brown or mongoloid people.”

All in all, Keevak’s book is well-documented and highly impressive for its ability to weave together primary sources in multiple European languages. Offering an update of sorts on previous works of scholarship such as Jonathan Spence’s *The Chan’s Great Continent: China in Western Minds* (1998), it addresses a topic that many would admit as being essential and relevant, but which few have actually been able to properly examine in an empirically grounded fashion. While the exact origins of the use of yellow as a designation for East Asians turns out to be a rather complicated story, readers of the book will nevertheless be able to gain a deeper appreciation of the shifts in early modern Western natural and social science that slowly coalesced into the racial categories which we would recognize today.

It is worthwhile to note that despite its universal-sounding subtitle, “A Short History of Racial Thinking,” Keevak’s account focuses almost exclusively on racial thinking in the Western academic tradition, with only a short discussion of

the Chinese and Japanese receptions of these notions in the final chapter. Although certainly beyond the scope of this study, it would have been interesting to see how such Western racialism compares to racial thinking in East Asian traditions, even if, as Keevak claims, the preoccupation with determining a particular color for each geographical grouping is something that seemingly did not exist in premodern China or Japan. Additionally, his book raises the question: do the revelations in *Becoming Yellow* change our understanding of how certain stereotypes have been perpetuated and reinterpreted in more modern times, and in other types of social contexts?

Along these lines, one example that comes to mind is John Dower's *War Without Mercy* (1986), which compares the wartime propaganda employed by the United States versus Japan, and vice versa, during the Pacific War. While the notion of Japan as a heavily racialized "yellow" enemy—often depicted with yellow skin and exhibiting simian traits—was a common trope in the American wartime media, Dower's book also reveals that Japanese self-images at the time frequently invoked "white" as a color representing the purity of its own people, befitting a nation waging a "holy war" in the name of the emperor. Also, how has the concept of the "yellow race" been affected by the spatial and social contexts of immigration and public health? Books such as Mary Lui's *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the-Century New York City* (2005) and Nayan Shah's *Contagious Divides: Epidemics and Race in San Francisco's Chinatown* (2001) and *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* (2011) provide evidence that racial formations such as "yellow" and all its accompanying overtones of weakness, illness, and Otherness are just as much a social and legal construct as they are academic. It is therefore crucial to combine such spatial, social, and legal approaches with the careful academic and intellectual analysis conducted by Keevak to fully understand the complex ways in which race has been shaped over the course of history. In any case, Keevak's book offers a much-needed investigation into a persistent issue, and is sure to become a major contribution to future debates on the topic.