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## THE STATUS OF THE RACE CONCEPT IN CHINESE BIOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

*ABSTRACT:* This paper examines the status of the concept of race in China through a survey of research papers in *Acta Anthropologica Sinica*, China's only journal dedicated to biological anthropology. The survey leads to the conclusion that the concept of race is deeply rooted and uncritically accepted in Chinese biological anthropology.

*KEY WORDS:* Race – China – Biological anthropology

The study of human biological variation has been one of the most controversial fields in modern science. Much of the past and present controversy revolves around the concept of race and its utility as a research and pedagogical tool. The debate on the concept of race reached its peak in biological anthropology in the early 1960s, and it seems that it still has not been resolved. Several recent studies tried empirically to estimate the attitude of biological anthropologists towards the concept of race. Most of these studies were completed in the United States and they show that there has been a significant shift in anthropologists' views on the race concept in the past half-century, especially among younger scientists (Cartmill 1998, Lieberman *et al.* 1989, Lieberman, Kirk 2002, Lieberman, Reynolds 1996, Littlefield *et al.* 1982). Further reports from other countries, however, suggest that there are significant national differences in the attitudes towards the concept (Kaszycka, Strzałko 2002, Kaszycka, Štrkalj 2002, Štrkalj 2000a). In an attempt to further broaden our understanding of the status of the concept of race in different traditions of anthropological research, this study investigates the status of the concept of race in the People's Republic of China.

In order to assess the status of the concept of race in China we conducted a survey of the research papers published in the *Acta Anthropologica Sinica* (AAS), China's only journal fully dedicated to biological anthropology. The

journal was founded in 1982 by its editor Rukang Wu (formerly Ju-kang Woo) of the Institute of Vertebrate Paleontology and Paleoanthropology (IVPP), Chinese Academy of Sciences, Beijing. We analysed papers published from the first 1982 issue to the last issue of the 2001 volume. There were altogether 78 issues published in 20 years, 4 of them dedicated to a single topic (none of them concerning human variation) or serving as proceedings from international meetings. Consequently, 74 issues of the AAS are investigated. There are 779 research articles, 324 (41%) of which are directly related to human variation and are therefore relevant to our study.

Authors of these papers fall into five major categories, and are based in various research units: (i) Anthropologists working on Neolithic and historic burials and modern populations. They come from IVPP, the Institute of Archaeology (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) and a number of university departments; (ii) Paleoanthropologists, most of them working in the IVPP; (iii) Forensic anthropologists from the bureaus of public security and universities; (iv) Anatomists based in medical schools; (v) Geneticists from the Institute of Genetics (Chinese Academy of Sciences), and various university departments.

It is striking that none of these scientists come from a department of anthropology. That is simply because there is no department of anthropology in universities of

Mainland China, except in Zhongshan (Sun Yet-sien) University in Guanzhou, Xiamen University in Fujian, and Fudan University in Shang Hai. All these units are socio-culturally oriented.

Our survey revealed several important features concerning the concept of race. In all research papers the concept of race is utilized and taken for granted. None of the papers questions the value of biological classification of humans into races; on the contrary, one of their main objectives is to directly or indirectly provide support for a particular racial division.

Within this "racial paradigm" diverse research has been carried out. Generally, three major races, the Mongoloid or Yellow Race, Europeid/Caucasoid or White, and the Negroid or Black are recognized. Sometimes other races such as Australoid are added. Several papers concentrate directly on research into differences between major races. They focus on various morphological features such as the study of the shape and size of noses (Cheng *et al.* 1985), the metric characteristics of the innominate bones (Wu *et al.* 1982), facial surface morphology (Zhou, Wu 2001) or population genetics (Chen L., Du 1982, Lu *et al.* 1993). All these studies are concerned mainly with elucidating biological differences among major races.

The division of humankind into several major races is further supported by Chinese paleoanthropological research that demonstrates that these races were formed a relatively long time ago. It is generally held, for instance, that Mongoloids have deep roots going way back to *Homo erectus* in the Middle Pleistocene and that proto-Mongoloid populations appeared about 100,000 years ago. This is usually corroborated through citing the common cranio-dental features shared by ancient and recent inhabitants of China proper. This hypothesis can be perceived as a continuation of Franz Weidenreich's (1943) work, which emphasized the importance of regional continuity in human evolution. Since then, corroboration of this model has been one of the major goals of Chinese paleoanthropology.

Wu (1990), for instance, pointed out a number of features shared by fossil and living populations in the region. Taken together, they are meant to provide strong support for the hypothesis that humanity has had long-standing continuity in China. The features include: the anterior-lateral surface of the fronto-sphenoidal process of the zygomatic bone facing more forward, the curved contour of the lower margin of the zygomatic process of the maxilla, the high position of the lower margin of the zygomatic process joining with the maxillary body, a more obtuse zygomaxillary angle, a flat nasal region, a lower face, the contour of the suture between the frontal bone and the interorbital bones approximating to a horizontal curve, a rounded inferio-lateral orbital margin, the existence of sagittal keeling, high incidence of the Inca bone, high incidence of a shovel-shaped upper incisor.

Other paleoanthropological work, dealing mainly with various cranio-facial and dental features, produced similar conclusions (Liu, Yang 1999, Wang, Bräuer 1984, Wu

1998, Zhang 1998). Although the main objective of these studies is to investigate the origins of modern humans in China, they also demonstrate the lengthy history of physical differentiation among major races.

As is to be expected, a majority of the studies concerning human variation were carried out on local populations, which are considered to be Chinese representatives of the Mongoloid race. Research into fossil and recent human populations, based on population genetics, and on morphological and physiological traits, claims that the Chinese population could be divided into two biologically distinguishable groups: South and North Chinese (Wu *et al.* 1982, Yuan *et al.* 1985, Zhao *et al.* 1987, Zheng *et al.* 2000). Some researchers also propose that there is an area containing a third and smaller group, called the Tibetan-Yi corridor (Hu, Wang 1993).

The Northern group is assumed to be typically Mongoloid, having higher stature, a greater distance between the iliac crests, greater body weight, bigger girth of chest, shorter limbs, and higher head, face and nose. The Southern group is considered to have oceanic Negroid genes, with smaller body mass but relatively longer limbs (Han, Pan 1982, 1983, Zhang, Zhang 1982, Zheng *et al.* 2000). Consequently, in forensic anthropology, different regression formulas, such as calculation of stature from metric features of limb and other bones, were produced for Southern and Northern Chinese (Mo 1983, Peng, Zhu 1983). Research on human fossils and recent populations claims that South-North physical differentiation can be traced back to the Neolithic period, or even to the Late Paleolithic period (Chen D., Wu 1985, Chen D., Zhang 1998, Han, Pan 1982, 1983, Wang 1986).

Classification of Chinese populations does not stop at the North-South division, however. There are 56 ethnic groups in China, of which Han is the biggest, constituting 95% of the population. Out of 56 groups, 30 have their own languages, which are subdivided into over 200 dialects. The origin and demographic history of different ethnic groups in China have not been resolved yet. Although it has been acknowledged that cultural factors constitute the main differences between these groups, it has also been claimed that they, or at least some of them, could be distinguished on biological grounds. Biological differences between different ethnic groups have been widely debated in Chinese science. A lot of research has been carried out in this regard, including the study of surface morphology (Li *et al.* 2001, Zhang, Zhang 1982), physiology (Ji 1998, Yuan *et al.* 1985, Yuan, Du 1985) and population genetic distance (Chen F. *et al.* 1999, Teng *et al.* 2000, Xu *et al.* 2000, Zhang *et al.* 1998). All these studies argue not only that the Chinese population can be classified as Mongoloid, and further divided into biologically distinct southern and northern groups, but also that further subdivision into smaller units (often referred to as ethnic groups, tribes or branches) is possible.

Special efforts have been made to prove the Mongoloid affinity of ethnic groups living in the border regions and

those traditionally believed to have foreign origins, such as Li in Hainan Island (Zhang, Zhang 1982); and Tibetan (Yang 1983, Zhang 1985), Uygur (Zhao *et al.* 1987) and Hui (Yuan *et al.* 1985) in West China.

A number of research papers in AAS are devoted to a comparison between populations in adjacent regions, such as in Japan, southeastern Asia, and Australasia, and their relationship with the Mainland Asian populations. As generalized by Wu (1987, 1988) the Chinese human fossils have a close affinity to the people of the surrounding area. This research serves to demarcate the general division of major races.

The fact that not a single paper questions the validity of "race" clearly indicates that the concept has been deeply rooted in the minds of Chinese anthropologists. A racial approach to the study of human variation is adopted by all active researchers, who are also on the teaching staff of various educational institutions, so such an attitude towards the race concept and study of human variation is likely to be transmitted to the next generation of Chinese scientists.

These results dramatically contrast with those obtained from similar studies in Poland (Kaszycka, Strzałko 2002, Kaszycka, Štrkalj 2002) and the United States (Cartmill 1998, Lieberman *et al.* 1989, Lieberman, Kirk 2002, Lieberman, Reynolds 1996, Littlefield *et al.* 1982). Generally speaking, there has been a shift towards a non-racial approach to the study of human variation in both countries, but it has been more pronounced in the US. In both countries the younger generation seems to be more prone to accept this approach. This shift does not appear in China, where race seems to be accepted as a "natural thing" by all generations of anthropologists. There are therefore significant national differences concerning anthropologists' attitudes towards the concept of race. There are probably many reasons for these differences, but some of the main ones are due to social factors. Polish and American studies suggest that these factors strongly influence anthropologists' attitudes towards the concept of race.

In a big multi-ethnic country such as China the maintenance of national consolidation and stability is perhaps the primary task. In China this tendency might have been projected into biological discourse as a philosophy of variety within unity, or the existence of distinct populations within one – Mongoloid – race. Furthermore, the fact that Chinese scientists claim that this racial identity can be followed way back into the past, provides the concept with additional unifying power. In contrast to the USA, where various populations are perceived as different races, diverse ethnic groups in China are grouped, or are forced in some cases, into one race. Race, therefore, somewhat paradoxically, becomes a powerful tool in uniting diverse human groups in China.

Another reason for uncritical acceptance of the concept of race in China might be sought in its relative isolation from Western science. The fact that there are only a few departments of anthropology in Chinese universities might be a contributing factor.

Finally, what do these national differences tell us about biological anthropology in general? Is there one discipline, or several national versions of it which are highly influenced by the social and political contexts? One possible answer is that national variations are so acute because of the immaturity of biological anthropology. In spite of many recent advances in biological anthropology, it is a young discipline, perhaps still in its pre-paradigm phase (Štrkalj 2000b). It may be anticipated that, as it matures and develops further empirically and theoretically, these differences might diminish or disappear.

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