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Abstract:

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Keywords:

Mixed race studies, state of the field, Asia

Citation:

Teng, Emma. “The Asian Turn in Mixed Race Studies: Retrospects and Prospects.” *Asia Pacific Perspectives*, Vol. 14, no. 2, 80-85.

Date of Publication: Vol. 14, no. 2, Spring 2017

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In 1930, the young Han Suyin (pen name of Rosalie Chou, 1916-2012) read this passage in a book called *Races of the World*: “Racial mixtures are prone to mental unbalance, hysteria, alcoholism, generally of weak character and untrustworthy...” Shaken, she prayed, “Oh God... don’t let me go mad, don’t let my brain go, I want to study.”¹

Probably the most famous Eurasian author of the 20th century, one who served as a major interpreter of China to the West during the tumultuous Cold War era, Han was haunted by these words and driven throughout her life by a determination to prove them untrue, fighting the pronounced stigma and the obstacles faced by mixed-heritage individuals during her era. As she highlighted in this famous scene from her autobiographical *A Mortal Flower* (1965), such stigma was not only a product of social prejudice, but also heavily reinforced by scientific and pseudoscientific discourses of the time.

From our vantage point today, it is a good moment to take stock of how far we have come (or failed to come) over the century that separates us from Han’s birth. How have popular perceptions of “mixed-race” peoples changed in Asia and across the globe? How have academic discourses evolved? And perhaps most importantly, how have “mixed” individuals themselves advocated for their equal rights and recognition? The articles in this pathbreaking issue of *Asia Pacific Perspectives* address these vital questions and others, focusing their analyses on historical and contemporary manifestations of “mixedness” across East Asia.

“Mixed race” first became a subject of serious study in the 19th century, when European and American debates over race placed the issue of “human hybridity” at the center of a battle between monogenists and polygenists, with their radically divergent views on the unity of the human race.² Whereas the former argued for the essential unity of mankind, the latter proposed separate origins for the different human races, which they regarded as analogous to distinct species. The question of human hybridity was pivotal in this regard: if the human hybrid was shown infertile like the mule and other animal “crosses,” then the polygenist thesis, and the notion of race as species, could be substantiated. Since ample evidence to the contrary existed in the American South, Latin America, British India and elsewhere, racial theorists like Paul Broca, Herbert Spencer, and others developed various theses of hybrid racial degeneration to support the contention that racial amalgamation was unnatural, abhorrent, and detrimental. Based on such theories, “racial mixtures” were said to inherit “the worst of both sides,” to be biologically, mentally and morally inferior, and given to degeneration over time. Scientists cited as supporting evidence a host of problems purportedly common among mixed-race individuals: physical abnormalities, stunted growth, low fertility, alcoholism and addiction, promiscuity, duplicity, mental instability, suicidal tendencies, and below-average intelligence.³ As Dr. H.N. Ridley proclaimed in a paper on the “Eurasian Problem” presented to the Straits Philosophical Society in 1895, for example: “Taking the race as a whole they are weak in body, short-lived, deficient in energy and feeble in morals. Even a little admixture of native blood seems to result in an individual who possesses the bad qualities of both races.”⁴ In this manner, the medical and scientific discourses on hybrid degeneration lent credibility to long-standing cultural and religious taboos against intermarriage. Like US anti-miscegenation laws of the time, scholarly discourses were mainly focused on white and nonwhite unions.

Against the thesis of hybrid degeneration, others argued that miscegenation was a productive force, enabling the emergence of new, “intermediate” racial types from the crossing of parent stocks. Alluding to examples from plant and animal breeding, some even argued for “hybrid vigor” in mixed offspring, suggesting that mixed-race populations could more readily acclimatize to settlement and development of tropical colonies than “pure” Europeans. Although this remained a minority position among European and American racial theorists, the notion of “constructive miscegenation” gained traction among Latin American eugenics advocates, as elucidated by Nancy Stepan.⁵ In Asia as well, Japanese and Chinese racial theorists touted the possibilities of constructive miscegenation as a means of strengthening the national racial body, a project of particular urgency in the context of a perceived global struggle for the survival of the fittest.⁶ In Japan, Takahashi Yoshio’s treatise “On the Amelioration of the Japanese Race,” published in 1884, advocated intermarriage between Japanese and Westerners for eugenic purposes. This notion of eugenic intermarriage gained such currency among “scholars and politicians” in Japan that Baron Kentaro Kaneko was prompted to write to Herbert Spencer for advice in 1892; and despite Spencer’s urging that such intermarriage “should be positively forbidden” to prevent racial degeneracy, the Japanese government ultimately declined to institute anti-miscegenation laws.⁷ Similarly, in China, preeminent Confucian philosopher and reformer, Kang Youwei (1858-1927) advocated “yellow and white” intermixing as a vehicle for “racial improvement” and the survival of the Chinese race. He moreover suggested that Chinese intermarriage with the “darker races” would also benefit the cause of “unifying” the races of the world. Hence, eugenics discourse, which really gained momentum in the early 20th century, was put to diverse uses: invoked to justify anti-miscegenation laws and other racial hygiene policies, on one hand, but also to promote racial intermarriage and genetic heterogeneity, on the other. Such examples demonstrate the necessity of understanding the history of racial theory within a comparative framework.

A very different approach to the study of mixed race came to the fore in the 1920s and 1930s, with a flourishing of sociological investigations of racial intermarriage and “mixed bloods.” Led by sociologist Robert Park and cultural anthropologist Franz Boas, a new generation of scholars turned away from natural science and took the position that “racial problems” are sociological or cultural rather than biological. Refuting the prevailing Anglo-American conviction that miscegenation was biologically harmful, as promoted through texts such as *Races of the World*, sociologists like E.B. Reuter argued that: “It appears to be fairly well-established as a biological fact that, as such, neither inbreeding nor outbreeding has any beneficial or injurious consequences.”⁸ Nonetheless, they asserted that race mixing had great *sociological* significance, and that mixed-race populations could be utilized as a “key” to understanding race relations and sociological processes of cultural contact across various racial and cultural “frontiers” globally. East Asian sociologists, many trained by Park and others of the Chicago School, participated actively in producing research in this area.

Although sociologists did much to counter the notion that “racial hybrids” were “biologic freaks,” their turn away from biology was incomplete. Indeed, a certain paradox emerged as Park and others denied the existence of “pure races” in any strict sense, but continued to use the terms “mixed-blood” and “pure-blood” as sociological categories, even reifying the former as a distinct sociological type.⁹ Perhaps most infamously, Chicago School sociologists developed the theory of the “mixed blood” as a “marginal man” who suffers from inner turmoil and malaise, because he “lives in two worlds, in both of which he is more or less of a stranger.”¹⁰ Equally controversial, Reuter and others promoted a type of “hybrid exceptionalism” in arguing that “mixed bloods” had higher levels of achievement and success than minorities of “pure blood.” Although never entirely displacing life science and physical anthropological approaches to the subject, the sociological paradigm became influential with the post-World War II repudiation of Nazism and associated racial ideologies. The UNESCO Statement on Race, for example, drafted in 1949, pronounced race to be a purely social

construct, and strongly refuted the myth of hybrid degeneracy: “evidence points unequivocally to the fact that race-mixture does not produce biologically bad effects.”¹¹

A third major turn came in the 1990s, with the genesis of Mixed Race Studies and Critical Mixed Race Studies. As an interdisciplinary field, Mixed Race Studies diverges significantly from the scholarship of the preceding decades in its intimate relationship with organized social movements led by mixed individuals and families themselves. Largely aiming to destigmatize mixed race, interrogate dominant constructs of race, and contest “monoracialism,” with its grounding in traditions of hypodescent (commonly referred to as the “one drop rule”), this newer body of scholarship emerged in tandem with collective organizing and political activism around mixed race issues, most prominently the demand for institutional recognition of multiracial identities. A pioneer in this field, clinical psychologist Maria Root, proposed a “Bill of Rights for People of Mixed Heritage” in 1993. At the same time, the flourishing of interest in “hybridity” as a critical category in postcolonial theory promoted a large wave of scholarship on the discursive and representational aspects of this phenomenon, and its relation to complex hierarchies of power. Further feeding into the development of this field was a “boom in biracial biography,” as identified by Paul Spickard in 2001: a flowering in the publication of biographical and autobiographical narratives centered on the lived experiences of mixed heritage peoples. Unlike the earlier natural and social scientific attempts to fix “mixed race” types, or make broad pronouncements regarding the effects of racial intermixing, the more recent literature has frequently emphasized the historical and cultural contingency of race as a social construct, its fluidity and instability, and the liberatory or contestatory nature of hybridity. Critical Mixed Race Studies in particular, aims to “critique processes of racialization and social stratification based on race,” and to “address local and global systemic injustices rooted in systems of racialization.”¹²

Signaling the institutional arrival of Mixed Race Studies was the publication in 2004 of the Routledge reader, *“Mixed Race” Studies*, edited by Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe. The publication of this text, which anthologized an array of key examples of historical and contemporary scholarship on mixed race, was a major breakthrough for this new field and facilitated the further development of university curricula in this area. Yet, notably marginalized in this volume were the experiences of mixed-race subjects in Asia, or the work of Asian thinkers on the subject of racial and cultural hybridity – a reflection of the broader orientation of this field as well as the status of Asian Studies itself within the Anglo-American academy. More recently published collections, such as *International Perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Mixing* (Edwards et al. 2012) and *Global Mixed Race* (King-O’Riain et al. 2014) similarly give scant or no attention to Asia.

Anthologies are selective, of course, and no single volume can cover the entirety of any domain of knowledge. Such lack of visibility is nonetheless notable in light of the fact that Asian perspectives had earlier been included in an anthology published in Temple University Press’s Asian American History and Culture series, *The Sum of Our Parts: Mixed-Heritage Asian Americans* (2001). This volume dedicated a section to mixed-heritage Asians in a global context, with chapters on Britain, the Netherlands, Japan, Surinam, and Thailand. Moreover, the earlier wave of sociological work by the Chicago School and others had often focused quite centrally on race mixing in Asia – an area of the world that has exhibited immense diversity in its histories of cross-cultural contact, trade, migration, conquest, colonialism and nation-building. Why, then, did scholarship on Asia so often find itself at the margins of the new field of Mixed Race Studies?

One answer might have to do with the continuing tendency to conceptualize race predominantly in a binary, white-black fashion in contemporary American public life, even as there is widespread awareness of the growing demographic diversity and complexity of the nation. This majority-minority binary is one that Asians fit awkwardly, as theorized by various scholars. Perhaps equally

important is the status of Asian Studies within American academic institutions. Asian Studies is still perceived by some as a “niche” field, mostly of interest to those who seek specialized knowledge of Asia and less relevant to broader, more generalizable theoretical discussions within the academy: a problem that scholars of Asian Studies have struggled against for decades. Compounding this geographic marginalization is the necessity of mastering a difficult Asian language (or languages), which limits the field’s general accessibility and reinforces the image of Asianists as “specialists” within a narrow domain. For many reasons, then, opportunities for comparative discussions, even with Asian Americanists, are less readily available than one might hope.

A further obstacle to the development of Mixed Race Studies with an Asia focus is the fact that the concept of “race” itself is not easily defined within the Asian context, encompassing as it does a broad swath of nation states and cultures across East, Southeast, South, Northeast, and West Asia. Chinese and Japanese concepts of “race” and ethnic identity, for example, have differed historically from American concepts and also from one another. Although Western racial theory was imported into Asia from the 19th century on, it was also adapted to suit local purposes and political agendas, and thus itself “hybridized” in the process. For many in East Asia, the construct of “mixed blood,” which denotes a wide variety of mixed heritages, including not only white and Asian, but also black and Asian, Chinese and Japanese, Hakka and Punti, Korean and Malay, is more pertinent. In what ways does “blood” as a construct correlate, or not correlate, to the construct of “race”? What is the relationship of “blood” to ethnicity, or to culture, language, nation? How have various material contexts shaped the formation of racial, ethnic, cultural, and national identities across, and intra-Asia? How have histories of colonization, imperialism and militarism profoundly shaped these processes, and left legacies that many still grapple with today? If defining “race” in the Asian context is far from straightforward, defining “mixedness” is equally challenging -- as evidenced by the heated battles over defining the term “Eurasian” on Wikipedia and various online forums.

The challenge, then, for Asia scholars is to develop more rigorous comparative frameworks that can account for these differences yet remain relevant to broader theoretical discussions. Adding to the vibrancy and vitality of these conversations is the participation of scholars located in Asia, who bring different perspectives and often different questions to bear on our analysis of “mixedness.” In this manner, the study of intermixing and hybridity not only enriches our understanding of Asian societies across historical time, but also our understanding of mixed identities and processes of racialization as global phenomena.

A major step toward this goal was taken with the convening of the international symposium, “Negotiating Identities: Mixed Race Individuals in China, Japan, and Korea,” hosted by the University of San Francisco Center for Asia Pacific Studies in April 2016. Bringing together scholars from the US, Canada, Britain, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea and Australia, working in disciplines ranging from sociology to history, cultural studies, media studies, and international education, the symposium provided fertile ground for discussion of new research on the varied crosscultural encounters that led to the creation of interracial families in East Asia, and the question of how those of mixed heritage have negotiated their identities in East Asian societies, historically and today. How have East Asian societies regarded “racial mixing”? What have been the varied meanings of “mixed race” across cultures? How did different institutions emerge in reaction to the “problem” of “mixed-bloods”? Under what conditions have those of mixed heritage been idealized as racial or cultural intermediaries? How have mixed heritage individuals themselves organized to fight for their rights and recognition? With the aim of fostering stronger links between Asian Studies and Asian American Studies, the symposium featured a roundtable on contemporary perspectives on US Mixed Race Studies. In addition to the global perspectives represented by conference participants, an especially valuable aspect of the symposium was the opportunity for panelists and audience

members to share their personal experiences and viewpoints on “mixedness,” with a candor and respect that Han Suyin would have appreciated.

There is a broader movement afoot. Since the 1990s, Asia has enjoyed a boom in the publishing of memoirs, local community histories, pictorial collections, and other [often nostalgic] works memorializing the experiences of mixed communities in Asia. In 2005, Singapore opened the Peranakan Museum to showcase the unique and “eclectic” culture of the Peranakans, with their mixed Chinese and Malaysian heritage. Online communities, NGOs, and other groups have worked actively to bring mixed identities to the fore – with some focused on the building of collective identity or the recording of shared history, and others more directly engaged in activist struggles for political rights, equity and inclusion. Mixed identities in Asia have thus gained increased recognition, even as local concerns surrounding migration, intermarriage, labor, and citizenship have become hot button issues in many Asian societies. The continuing popularity of mixed celebrities, now of increasingly diverse backgrounds, has also kept “mixedness” in the media across Asia. Scholarship on intermarriage, mixed race, and other mixed identities in Asia is flourishing, produced by scholars based in Asia and beyond, and across the disciplines of history, sociology, anthropology, literature, media studies, ethnic studies and postcolonial studies.

At the end of the day, however, we are still stymied by the problem faced by Chicago Sociologists decades ago: how do we study something called “mixed race” and at the same time contest the validity of so-called “pure races.” In labeling some “mixed” do we not inadvertently reinforce the notion that others are “pure”? Can Critical Mixed Race Studies maintain its “critical” edge if we adopt the position that “everyone is mixed”? In addition, the growth of anthropological genetics as a field and the increasing popularity of commercial DNA testing that promises to reveal “how much of a mixture is your own DNA recipe” or “what percentage European or African you are” serve as a new challenge to academic understandings of the socially constructed nature of both “race” and “mixedness.”¹³ We face other, less purely theoretical, challenges as well: we must ask ourselves whether the oft-proposed notion that “intermixing” will bring about a post-racial society is a simple distraction from other, more difficult questions of race and inequality? In what ways have conservatives used the “conundrum” of mixed race to challenge affirmative action and dismantle civil rights legislation in the US? Does the new racial cosmopolitanism of our global age mask the ever-widening divide of economic inequality and class? How do we explain the simultaneous hyper-visibility of “mixed” or “biracial” celebrities and the resurgence of white supremacy as an ideology and political movement? As a field of study fundamentally dedicated to the critical contestation of borders, how will Critical Mixed Race Studies respond to the renewed momentum in favor of borders and wall-building? Asian Studies scholarship, and Asian historical examples, must be taken seriously in our quest for answers.

The articles collected in this volume represent a major step toward this goal. Two other emergent directions in the field are shaping a new generation of scholarship. One is the globalization of Mixed Race Studies that is generating dynamic dialogues among scholars situated in the Americas, Asia, Australasia, Africa, Europe and the Middle East. The second is a shift away from the historical preoccupation with white/nonwhite intermixing to more sustained and comparative analysis of the wide spectrum of mixed families and identities beyond whiteness: for example, Indian and Japanese, Korean and African American, or Chinese and Mexican. Despite the rise of xenophobia, nativism and borders, then, this is an exciting moment to watch the field evolve in ways that Han Suyin perhaps never imagined.

NOTES

1. Han Suyin, *A Mortal Flower: China, Autobiography, History* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1965), 148-149. Han is likely referring to Pouffe, *Races of the World* (London: Geographia, 1919).
2. See Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 2010).
3. See Emma J. Teng, *Eurasian: Mixed Identities in the United States, China, and Hong Kong, 1842-1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 95.
4. H.N. Ridley, "The Eurasian Problem," August 10, 1895, in *Noctes Orientales: Being a Selection of Essays Read before the Straits Philosophical Society between the Years 1893 and 1910* (Singapore: Kelly and Walsh, 1913), 54-56.
5. Nancy Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).
6. Yuehtsen Juliette Chung, *Struggle for National Survival: Eugenics in Sino-Japanese Contexts, 1896-1945* (New York: Routledge, 2002).
7. "Letter of Herbert Spencer to Baron Kaneko Kentaro, August 26, 1892," *London Times*, January 22, 1904, "SPENCER ON JAPAN; Full Text of the Philosopher's Remarkable Letter. He Tells Baron Kentaro Kaneko that Americans and Europeans Should Be Kept at Arm's Length," *New York Times*, January 31, 1904, p. 4, <http://nyti.ms/2gxVrOZ>, Manfred Berg and Simon Wendt, *Racism in the Modern World: Historical Perspectives on Cultural Transfer and Adaptation* (New York, NY: Berghahn, 2014), 265.
8. Reuter, Edward Byron, *Race Mixture Studies in Inter-marriage and Miscegenation* (New York: Whittlesey House, McGraw-Hill, 1931), 5.
9. Reuter, Edward Byron, "The Hybrid as a Sociological Type," *Publications of the American Sociological Society* 19 (1925): 59-68.
10. Robert E. Park, "Human Migration and the Marginal Man," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 33, no. 6, 1928: 881-893, 893.
11. "Statement on 'Race'," United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Meeting of Experts on Race Problems, UNESCO House, December 12-14, 1949, 4.
12. Critical Mixed Race Studies, "Mission Statement," <https://criticalmixedracestudies.wordpress.com/about-cmrs/>, accessed April 5, 2017.
13. <https://genographic.nationalgeographic.com/about/> <https://www.legalgenealogist.com/2014/04/06/2014-most-bang-for-dna-bucks/>, accessed April 5, 2017.