

## Racism In China

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DURING my stay in China all I ever experienced were racial taunts, blatant discrimination and general loathing from the majority" says mixed-race Canadian teacher David Szykulski, "Han Chinese people are the most openly xenophobic people I have ever met."

Many will tell you racism doesn't exist in China, and evidence is certainly hard to find within a native population of more than 1 billion, but could prejudice against foreigners - especially non-whites - be simmering beneath the surface?

If looking for evidence of racial discrimination one may struggle to find it and examples of actual hatred are even rarer. In fact, as many will state, the Chinese are well known for their politeness and respect towards foreigners.

Many rarely encounter those from abroad - especially those with dark skins - so quizzical curiosity (or reticence) is common, and often misinterpreted. It is certainly true that to clumsily extrapolate race issues in the West onto China misunderstands the people and their beliefs.

But is there an underlying discrimination towards non-whites; maybe rarely exhibited because of infrequent contact, but present nonetheless?

### Status discrimination

The word racism evokes images of hate, violence and antagonism, but its definition extends to a belief that some races have an innate superiority to others. Or, as a comment from a student at

Chengdu University succinctly demonstrates: "There is no racism in China because there are no black people."

Sociology Professor Yu Hai, who has studied at Fudan University for 17 years, believes a long-standing Chinese tradition of discrimination according to "status" has created an atmosphere conducive to racial prejudice.

"According to your status in society you receive different benefits and power. Rural people and city people; ordinary people and officials. In such a social structure, we can predict that the Chinese will have very strong feelings of racial discrimination."

Yu believes dark-skinned foreigners are likely to face more obstacles than whites, as many Chinese see them as inferior.

Many have ingrained impressions of African wars, famine and disease from the mass media, says the sociology professor. Plus a perception of a dichotomous West with exclusively well-educated and prosperous whites, and poverty-stricken ethnic minorities.

One city resident told the Shanghai Star that "crime is so low in Shanghai because there are no black people."

Other possible root causes could be the perceived "uncouth" behaviour of a minority of African expats during the eighties, which created a negative stereotype. Unfavourable portrayals of dark-skinned characters in movies is also widely cited as unhelpful.

Indians and Filipinos may face prejudice because of a perceived history of subservience to whites, says Yu Hai. And the Japanese are often reviled because of a long history of conflict with China.

There are cultural reasons too. A popular saying "one white covers up a thousand defects" describes a Chinese preference for lighter skin, and its association with beauty and prosperity. Many consider paler skinned women to be more attractive.

David Szykulski believes his skin colour stopped him getting a teaching job, despite his suitable qualifications. On the Hard News Cafe website Indian American Leon D'Souza describes a similar experience.

"I asked if my race would pose a problem. There was dead silence on the other end of the line. With a faint stutter, the principal of the school replied, 'Frankly speaking, we would like our teachers to look professional. I mean, please don't get me wrong, but we would like a white teacher'."

Teaching recruiter Tony Lee confirms that it can be difficult for non-whites, however he says Western English speakers usually encounter fewer problems. More common in teaching circles is discrimination against Africans, Indians and Asians - especially in sophisticated cities like Shanghai. This is based on a perceived view that Western English is "proper" English.

Professor Yu Hai says most will be respectful or even humble when encountering Westerners - even non-whites - but will look down on foreigners from poorer parts of the world. Prosperity and wealth can have a weighty influence. So could country of origin be more important than race to the Chinese? The words zhongzu ("race") and minzu ("nation-race") are distinguished in the Chinese language. However, presumed racial genetic features can transcend "nation-race" according to Chinese History Professor Frank Dikotter at the University of London.

Yu Hai suggests the clearest example of this is a belief that intimate relationships with non-whites are unnatural, irrespective of country of origin.

"If a Chinese woman dates a white man it is social climbing. If she is with a black man, it is 'stepping down'. In this situation, the Chinese will express very strong feelings about ethnicity."

#### Potential trouble

Today's Chinese students, like Fudan University's Diana Cheung, seem far from outraged however, saying that because cross-cultural relationships are rare in China, the resultant attention and staring they attract is curiosity, not disdain.

She and her fellow students socialise with foreigners of all races, and while agreeing that racial prejudice exists in those with "older ideas", they say that it is seldom seen amongst their contemporaries.

As for the future, opinion differs about the impact of an escalating number of foreigners entering

China. Interaction could break down false conceptions about non-whites; conversely the influx may evolve in many people's minds into a so-called "threat". Worryingly Yu Hai agrees with the latter prediction.

"Racial issues could become a serious problem as China develops and more foreigners come here seeking a job. Then we would have some conflict."

Whether racial prejudice will become more prominent or prove negligible as many believe it already is, China is continuing to tempt foreigners of all races to its shores, so increasing contact will certainly force the issue further into the open. Richard Fisher