CHAPTER THREE

HOW THE “MONGOLOID RACE” CAME INTO BEING:
LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CONSTRUCTIONS OF EAST ASIANS
IN EUROPE

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The eighteenth century was no doubt the most original and productive epoch in the long development of the racial idea. This “cradle of modern racism,” as one prominent historian referred to it, lasted, in fact, a few decades. Taking part during the final years of the Age of Enlightenment and heralding the modern era, this stage served as a seminal and indispensable link between a myriad of early modern ethnographic observations and the scientific racism of the nineteenth century. The idea of immutable physical characteristics, the division of mankind into a few great races each with a list of inscribed traits, the inclusion of these races within an all-embracing natural taxonomy, and the emergence of an explicit hierarchical order separating the races and headed by Europeans were all the products of that century, its final decades in particular. Side by side, it was here when Europeans relegated East Asians to a secondary position for the first time and began their long process of inferiorization. This chapter examines the developments concerning the idea of an East Asian “race” during this crucial epoch and focuses on the way it came to be referred to as “mongolische Rasse” in German; “Mongol,” “Mongolian,” or “Mongoloid race” in English. This outcome is astonishing enough. For Mongols had certainly played an important role in world and in European history. But this was true for the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, not for the eighteenth, which in turn was intensely occupied with things

2 In German, only the term mongolische Rasse exists. As far as I can tell, the first English translators preferred “Mongolian” (but sometimes also “Mongul” or “Mongolic”) race or variety, and this was commonly used in the nineteenth century, whereas “Mongoloid race” was preferred after World War I. Cf. the sources reproduced by Augstein, 1996: 65–66, 111, 132, 184. In the second half of the eighteenth century in particular, the terminology such as it relates to “race,” “variety,” “class” etc. was variant, even in Blumenbach. See Klatt, 2010: 19–25. Hudson (1996) tries to delineate changes of the meaning of “race”, “nation” and “tribe”.

Chinese, not only insofar as material culture was concerned, but also in intellectual discussions.

*An Asian Race—But Not a “Mongolian” One*

Debates employing the term “race” for categorizing human beings are obviously much older than the creation of the term “Mongolian race.” It is well known that an article published in the *Journal des Sçavans* in 1684, almost certainly written by the French medical doctor François Bernier, inaugurated this discussion. Bernier described four races and characterized the races he located in East Asia and parts of South East, Central and even West Asia in contrast to what was later called the Caucasian Race as having broad shoulders, a flat face, a flattened nose, small, long and cavernous pig-eyes and just three whiskers instead of a beard. He considered them, however, as “really white” [@anonymous1684:136]. About two decades later, Leibniz mentioned four divisions of mankind in the “Old World,” two extreme ones—the Laplanders and the blackish people—and two intermediary ones: the Europeans and the inhabitants of the Extreme East and the Northeastern Eurasian continent.

Carl Linnaeus (Carl von Linné, 1707–1778), the founding father of the biological terminology still in use today, was even less subtle in his distinctions compared to Bernier, since he just followed the traditional geographical divisions and therefore only knew of a “homo Asiaticus.” He described this generic Asian as being *fuscus* [dark] in some of the earlier editions of his *Systema naturae* (first published in 1735), and as *luridus*, i.e., light yellow or yellow in the later ones. The Abbé de la Croix then divided mankind into blacks and whites, and the latter he subdivided into proper white, brown, olive-tinged and yellowish people, counting Japanese and Northern Chinese among the first and Southern Chinese among the second, albeit ascribing the same form of faces and bodies to both

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3 The following explanations are based on Demel, 1992a, and on Blumenbach, 1798: 208–212 entitled *Die Einteilung des Menschengeschlechts in Racen, nach andern Schriftstellern* [The Classification of Mankind into Races, by Other Authors].

4 [Anonymous], 1684: 136.