CHAPTER 3

Constructing Racial Theories on East Asians as a Transnational “Western” Enterprise, 1750–1850

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“On that same latitude where I had found the beautiful Whites of England, France, Sweden, Germany, I meet dark men in Tartary.”¹ These lines appeared in a French book entitled Treatise on the color of the human skin, which was published in Amsterdam in 1765. The author, Claude-Nicolas Le Cat, was a well-known medical doctor, the chief surgeon of a hospital in Rouen and a full or corresponding member of the scientific academies of Paris, London, Madrid, Porto, Berlin, Lyon, Halle, Bologna, St. Petersburg and, of course, Rouen, where he acted as perpetual secretary.² I do not intend to follow Le Cat’s partly absurd argumentation in the present discussion, but am rather using this example to show that the debate on “racial” questions, and those concerning East Asians in particular, was led by scholars who were linked by a scientific network from the very beginning. This network extended from Portugal to Russia and from Italy to Sweden. When academicians elected a new member, they did not just want to pay homage to him. They expected him to send them manuscripts or at least newly-printed publications. This was thus one of the ways in which scientific knowledge was disseminated all over Europe.³

Nevertheless, it is hardly surprising that Le Cat only counts the English, French, Swedes and Germans among the “beautiful Whites” to whom he later adds the Flemings—for he considered such peoples as the inhabitants of Spain, Portugal and even French Provence as having dark skin,⁴ somewhat similar to the Tartars’. It seems reasonable, therefore, to limit the scope of our enquiry into the transnational debate on race in general and the so-called Yellow Race in particular to just a few European countries—at least between 1750 and 1850:

¹ Le Cat, 1765: 3.
² Le Cat, 1765: Title page.
³ For European academies cf. Grau, 1988, who remarks on p. 175 that this sort of correspondence declined in the nineteenth century. For more about their role as the “motors” of scientific research in the eighteenth century see Voss, 1980.
⁴ Le Cat, 1765: 13.
France, Great Britain, Germany, and the Netherlands, which could collectively be called the core countries of the European Enlightenment, to which we may add such countries as Sweden, Switzerland and the British colonies in North America, the future United States, as peripherals. To the best of my knowledge, no scholar from any other country belonging to the so-called “West” has made a major contribution to this debate.  

In my view, two generations can be distinguished at this time. The first consists of the “founding fathers” of racial theories. These were the naturalists Linnaeus, Buffon, and Camper, to whom I would add the philosopher Kant, who also was born in the first quarter of the eighteenth century and who offered the first precise definition of “race” in 1775. The other generation was formed by men born after 1750 who built their conceptions on the theories developed by their predecessors, adopting, modifying and partly rejecting them. Based on this distinction, I will attempt to sketch an answer to the following questions: First, which racial ideas concerning East Asians were developed and disseminated by the “founding fathers”? and second, what was the (changing) place East Asians occupied in the taxonomies constructed by the main (or at least some of the main) contributors to the debate on race of the following generation?

The Founding Fathers of Racial Theories: Linnaeus, Buffon, Kant and Camper

It is generally accepted that the Swedish naturalist Linnaeus can be seen as the founding father of a taxonomy including the idea of human races. To Linnaeus, all morphologically determined species were fixed, and so was man. But Linnaeus also subdivided the species “man” according to the continents people lived in. In later editions of his *Systema Naturae*—more than a dozen appeared in his lifetime alone, not to mention translations—he characterized the Asian as “yellow, melancholic, rigid, with blackish hair, dark eyes,

5 It is telling that an author such as the Spaniard Caro Baroja starts his book on the foundations of modern anthropological thinking with an analysis of the works of German thinkers like Kant and does not even mention Spanish authors: Caro Baroja, 1991. The fact that the very term “the West” (which did not enter regular use before the second half of the nineteenth century) implied a differentiation between “core” and “peripheral countries,” is demonstrated by Demel, 2010: 2.

6 Knight, 1981: 69.