

Introduction

No Longer White

The Nineteenth-Century Invention of Yellowness

I first came to this project because I was interested in learning how East Asians became yellow in the Western imagination. Yet I quickly discovered that in nearly all the earliest accounts of the region, beginning with the narratives of Marco Polo and the missionary friars of the thirteenth century, if the skin color of the inhabitants was mentioned at all it was specifically referred to as white. Where does the idea of yellow come from? Where did it originate?

Many readers will be aware that a similar set of questions has been asked with respect to “red” Native Americans, and that the real source of that particular color term, much like East Asian yellow, remains something of a mystery. There is some evidence to suggest that the idea of the “red Indian” may have been influenced (although not fully explained) by the fact that according to European observers certain tribes anointed themselves with plant substances as a means of protection from the sun or from insects, and that this might have given their skin a reddish tinge. The stereotype of Indian war paint also comes to mind. Some tribes even referred to themselves as red as early as the seventeenth century, probably in order to distinguish themselves from both the European settlers and their African slaves.

Yet however flimsy or incomplete these accounts may be for Native Americans, in the case of East Asians there simply are no analogous explanations. No one in China or Japan applied yellowish pigment to the skin (and China and Japan will be the subject of this book; information about Korea was particularly sparse before the twentieth century), and no one in the Far East referred to himself as yellow until

late in the nineteenth century, when Western racial paradigms, along with many other aspects of modern Western science, were being imported into Chinese and Japanese contexts. But yellow does have very important significations in Chinese (but not Japanese) culture: as the central color, the imperial color, and the color of the earth; the color of the originary Yellow River and the mythical Yellow Emperor, the supposed ancestor of all Han Chinese people. “Sons of the Yellow Emperor” is still in use as a means of ethnic self-identification. Could the idea of yellow people have stemmed from some form of misunderstanding or mistranslation of these symbols? Most of them were well known to early Western commentators, especially the missionaries whose aim it was to learn about local beliefs and local cultural practices for the purposes of religious conversion. Their accounts of China routinely mentioned the Yellow River and the Yellow Emperor, and it is not difficult to imagine that such symbols could have been extended to represent the cultures of the entire East Asian region, just as Chinese learning and its written language had spread beyond the confines of the Celestial Empire.

And yet in every instance in which some idea of yellow in China was analyzed or even mentioned in the pre-nineteenth-century literature, there is not a single case I am aware of in which it was connected to the color of anyone’s *skin*. The idea that East Asian people were colored yellow cannot be traced back before the nineteenth century, and it does not come from any sort of eyewitness description or from Western readings of East Asian cultural symbols. We will see that it originates in a different realm, not in travel or missionary texts but in scientific discourse. For what occurred during the nineteenth century was that yellow had become a *racial* designation. East Asians did not, in other words, become yellow until they were lumped together as a yellow *race*, which beginning at the end of the eighteenth century would be called “Mongolian.”

This book is therefore concerned with the history of race and racialized thinking, and it seeks to redress an imbalance in the enormous field of race studies generally, which has concentrated intently on the idea of blackness as opposed to whiteness. The few treatments of the yellow race that have hitherto appeared, such as Lynn Pan’s

Sons of the Yellow Emperor or Frank Wu's *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*, have not been concerned with what we might call the prehistory of yellowness but only with its twentieth- and twenty-first-century manifestations. And texts that have provided a more historically nuanced account, such as Frank Dikötter's *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, or his edited volume, *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan*, have either sidestepped the question or given a partial and sometimes faulty summary.

The best work on the subject includes an excellent essay in German, "Wie die Chinesen gelb wurden" (How the Chinese Became Yellow), by Walter Demel, which along with an expanded version in Italian has served as the starting point for the present study. Rotem Kowner has also written suggestively on the "lighter than yellow" skin color of the Japanese, and David Mungello's introductory volume, *The Great Encounter of China and the West*, includes a short section called "How the Chinese Changed from White to Yellow." Despite such promising titles (and my own is equally guilty), each of these authors has discovered that trying to trace any straightforward development of the concept of yellowness is full of dead ends, because, as we will see in chapter 1, like most other forms of racial stereotyping, it cannot be reduced to a simple chronology and was the product of often vague and confusing notions about physical difference, heritage, and ethnological specificity.

Yet I have also followed the lead of these authors by pursuing a trajectory that emphasizes an important shift in thinking about race during the course of the eighteenth century, when new sorts of human taxonomies began to appear and new claims about the color of all human groups, including East Asians, were put forward. The received version of this taxonomical story, which we will trace in chapter 2, goes something like this. In 1684 the French physician and traveler François Bernier published a short essay in which he proposed a "new division of the Earth, according to the different species or races of man which inhabit it." One of these races, he was the first to suggest, was yellow. More influentially, the great Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus burst onto the international scene with his *Systema naturae* of 1735, the first major work to incorporate human beings

into a single taxonomical scheme in which the entire natural world was divided between the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms. *Homo asiaticus*, he said, was yellow. Finally, at the end of the eighteenth century, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, also a physician and the founder of comparative anatomy, definitively proclaimed that the people of the Far East were a yellow race, as distinct from the white “Caucasian” one, terms that have been with us ever since.

Yet there are a number of errors in this (admittedly oversimplified) narrative. In the first place Bernier did not say that East Asians were yellow; he called them *véritablement blanc*, or truly white. The only human beings he described as yellow, and not associated with an entire geographical grouping at all, were certain people from India, especially women. Immanuel Kant, also sometimes invoked as a source in this regard, agreed that Indians were the “true yellow” people. Second, we can indeed credit Linnaeus as the first to link yellow with Asia, but we need to approach this detail with considerable care, since in the first place he began by calling them *fuscus* (dark) and only changed to *luridus* (pale yellow, lurid, ghastly) in his tenth edition of 1758–59. Second, he was talking about the whole of Asia and not simply the Far East. As for Blumenbach, it is true that he unequivocally named East Asians as yellow (the Latin word he chose was *gilvus*, also revised from *fuscus*), but he simultaneously placed them into a racial category that he called the Mongolian, and it is this newly minted “Mongolianness” that has been unduly ignored in previous work on the subject.

For it was not simply the case that taxonomers settled upon yellow because it was a convenient intermediary (like red) between white and black—the two primal skin colors that had been taken for granted by the Judeo-Christian world for more than a thousand years. Rather, I would suggest that there was something dangerous, exotic, and threatening about Asia that “yellow” and “Mongolian” helped to reinforce, both of these terms becoming symbiotically linked to the cultural memory of a series of invasions from that part of the world: Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, and Tamerlane, all of whom were now lumped together as “Mongolian” as well. While this suggestion still does not fully explain why yellow was chosen from a myriad of other color possibilities, many of which continued to be used even after

Blumenbach's influential pronouncements, yellowness and Mongolianness mutually supported each other to solidify a new racial category during the course of the nineteenth century.

Travelers to East Asia began to call the inhabitants yellow much more regularly, and the “yellow race” became an important focus in nineteenth-century anthropology, the subject of my chapter 3. Early anthropology was overwhelmingly concerned with physical difference in addition to language or cultural practice, and skin color was one such preoccupation. Blumenbach and the comparative anatomists were obsessed with the measurement of human skulls, producing a theory of “national faces” that led to a hierarchical arrangement of the symmetrical “Caucasian” shape as opposed to more lopsided forms manifested by the other racial varieties. Blumenbach and his followers placed “Mongolian” skulls, along with “Ethiopian” ones, at the furthest extreme from the Caucasian ideal, with “American” and “Malay” heads in between.

But as anthropology came into its own in the middle of the nineteenth century, the process of physical measurement became much more complex and extended to minute quantifications of the entire body. A key figure here was Paul Broca, who by the time of his death in 1880 had invented more than two dozen specialized instruments for the purposes of human measurement. Less well known is his highly influential foray into the assessment of skin color, which, as we will see, he attempted to standardize by developing a chart with colored rectangles designed to be held up to the skin in order to find the closest match. Others tried to improve upon this rather cumbersome and subjective procedure by experimenting with different color ranges and introducing different media, such as glass tablets or oil paints, and by the end of the nineteenth century one popular alternative was a small wooden top upon which were placed a number of colored paper disks that blended together when the top was spun. The subjects to be measured would rest an arm upon a table next to the spinning top while the researcher adjusted the disks until they matched the color of the skin.

Such methods may seem quaint or entertaining today, but anthropologists took them very seriously and used them with great

frequency in many parts of the world. What especially interests me, however, is the way in which these tools functioned as means to invest preexisting racial stereotypes with new and supposedly scientifically validated literalness. Colors on color charts were never chosen and organized arbitrarily, and the color top employed white, black, red, and yellow disks despite the fact that many other combinations could have been used to replicate the rather limited tonal range that comprises human skin. This was not because, as the top's early developers claimed, these were the pigments actually present in the skin. Rather, white, black, red, and yellow were the colors presumed for the “four races of man” from the outset. When researchers began to quantify “Mongolian” skin color, it turned out to be some sort of in-between shade between white and black, and when the dice were loaded carefully enough, as in a color top, East Asian skin could turn out to be yellow after all.

In chapter 4 we will perceive a similar development in nineteenth-century medicine, which instead of color focused on the quantification of “Mongolian” bodies by associating them with certain conditions thought to be endemic in, or in some way linked to, the race as a whole, a list that includes the “Mongolian eye,” the “Mongolian spot,” and “Mongolism” (now known as Down syndrome). I will argue that each of these conditions became a way of distancing the Mongolian race from a white Western norm, since they were taken to be either characteristic of irregular East Asian bodies, as in the case of the Mongolian spot, which did not seem to occur among white people at all, or a feature that appeared among whites only in their youth or if they were afflicted by disease, as in the case of the Mongolian eye or Mongolism. Researchers also linked these “Mongolian” conditions to contemporary evolutionary theories about the way in which the white race had passed through the developmental stages still occupied by the lower ones. Thus the Mongolian spot, which was first noticed on Japanese babies, was seen as a pigmentary trace of an earlier stage of human evolution, perhaps even the trace of a monkey’s tail; white children might have something very like a Mongolian eye before they simply outgrew it; and people with Mongolism,

especially children, resembled racial Mongolians because it was a visible throwback to a previous evolutionary form.

Much as in the case of early anthropology, medical explanations for “Mongolian” pathology had an uncanny way of reinforcing the stereotypes with which researchers began. Physicians, too, regularly described East Asians as having yellow bodies, but “Mongolian” conditions could be linked to physiological degeneration and play into even older clichés about the static, infantile, and imitative Far East. White people might be afflicted with “Mongolian” traits temporarily or because of ill-health or a birth defect, but real yellow people remained stagnant and frozen in a permanent state of childishness, subhumanity, or underdevelopment.

By the end of the nineteenth century modern science had fully validated the yellow East Asian. But this yellowness had never ceased to be a potentially dangerous and threatening racial category as well, becoming particularly acute after larger numbers of East Asians had actually begun to immigrate to the West starting in the middle of the nineteenth century. The Far East now came to be seen as a “yellow peril,” a term coined in 1895 and generally credited to Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, specifically in response to Japan’s defeat of China, its far larger and more populous neighbor, at the conclusion of the Sino-Japanese War, also known as “The Yellow War.” Even worse, Japan had begun to form a colonial empire of its own, and when ten years later it had defeated Russia, too, it seemed to mark the end of the West’s control of the civilized world. This period will occupy us in chapter 5.

The yellow peril was a remarkably free-floating concept that could be directed at China or Japan or any other “yellow” nation, as well as to many kinds of perceived peril such as overpopulation, “paganism,” economic competition, and societal or political degradation. But we will also see that the West had begun to export its purportedly self-evident definitions of yellowness and Mongolianness into East Asian contexts, and that this dispersal was hardly simple and straightforward. In China, where yellow was such an ancient and culturally significant color, the West’s notion of a yellow race was a happy coincidence

and could be proudly inverted as a term of self-identification rather than just a racial slur, and not simply a cultural symbol but the actual color of Chinese nonwhite, non-Western skin. “Mongolian,” however, linked to the non-Chinese “barbarians” who had historically been the bane of China as well as the West, was summarily rejected. Japanese commentators, on the other hand, disavowed both yellow and Mongolian, which were said to be descriptors of other Asians only, especially the Chinese. Many Japanese preferred to be considered closer to the powerful white race than the lowly yellow one, and indeed many in the West agreed. In both China and Japan, however, Western racial paradigms had become so pervasive that even those for whom “yellow” was a term of opprobrium begrudgingly admitted that their skin color was something other than white.

I will bring this story to an end in the early twentieth century, not because it ceases to be interesting or important, but simply because after the 1920s and 1930s the idea of a yellow race—and of race in general—would be much better suited to a separate study. By those decades a yellow and a racially Mongolian Far East had crossed boundaries of language, discourse, location, level of education, and social rank (as well as boundaries of gender, not pursued in this book). I also do not attempt to trace similar developments in the representation of yellow people in the vast realm of literary, visual, and other arts (fiction and satire, political cartoons, book illustrations, chinoiserie objects, Hollywood film, vaudeville and stage plays, music). As was broadly the case with travel or scientific descriptions, artistic depictions of the people of the Far East were not yellow until (at the very earliest) the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Concluding in the early twentieth century, moreover, will help to emphasize what has hitherto escaped the full attention of scholars in the history of race and in East-West cultural studies generally, and what should be much more carefully examined in conjunction with the twentieth- and twenty-first-century forms of prejudice that are still being felt so acutely today. First, the idea of a yellow-colored people, centered in Asia, was new in 1800. Second, at much the same time, this notion of a racial group began to migrate away from Asia as a whole, itself a profoundly slippery and mythic Western geographical

category, and toward what we now refer to as East Asia. And third, the catalyst for both these developments was the invention of a Mongolian (and later, Mongoloid) race.

THE YELLOW FACE OF SATAN

In order to emphasize the way in which yellow was new at the turn of the nineteenth century, and that it pervaded fields of inquiry that might seem far removed from questions of race, I would like to begin with two examples. The first is a well-known passage from the last canto of Dante's *Inferno*, in which, in the ninth and last circle of hell the poet sees a terrifying vision of Satan, who is described as having three faces:

Oh what a great marvel appeared to me
when I saw three faces on his head!
The one in front, this one was vermillion;

and there were two others, joined with this one
above the middle of each shoulder
and joined at the crest:

the right one seemed between white and yellow;
the left was such to look upon as those
who come from where the Nile descends.

Inferno 34.37–45

Accustomed as we are to visualizing the world according to racial categories, it is not hard to imagine modern readers wondering whether these colored faces were supposed to represent different forms of human ethnicity. The left face, not actually named but situated geographically as “where the Nile descends,” is usually taken as black (although of course black is an equally imaginary skin tone and not all Africans are dark). But what of the other two faces? Why is the central face red or vermillion, and the one on the right “between white and yellow”?

Some readers might wish to appeal to the precedent of early European world maps, which did indeed take a tripartite form. Known

as T-O maps, they were shaped like a large T inside a circle, with the Asian continent situated on top and Europe and Africa, to the left and right respectively, placed beneath. And yet these maps never organized the world according to skin color, although Europeans certainly did think of themselves as white in contrast to most Africans, and although it was also something of a medieval stereotype (as in Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*) that the inhabitants of the Indies—which meant all the lands to the east of Europe—were “tinged with color” owing to the burning heat of the region.¹

To put the matter as succinctly as possible, the notion that Satan's three faces should be read as a reference to race has nothing whatever to do with Dante. I do not know of a single example of this sort of pigeonholing until the seventeenth century, and even then it was very exceptional. It was no accident, however, that racialized readings began to appear when obsessions with skin color classifications were increasingly becoming the norm. The first such reader seems to be Baldassare Lombardi, whose landmark 1791 edition of the poem created something of a stir when it attempted to solve the crux of Satan's three faces in a completely new way. His commentary began by noting that there had been considerable dispute about what the colors signified, but that it has been generally agreed upon that since Satan was a monstrous inverse or an ironic perversion of the triune God, it was appropriate for him to have three faces showing wrath (vermilion), envy or avarice (yellow-white), and sloth (black). Indeed in the fourth book of *Paradise Lost* Milton would echo this passage when he characterized Satan's face as “thrice chang[ing] with pale ire, envy, and despair.”

But “according to me,” Lombardi announced, “it might be better to understand these three faces and their colors as corresponding to the three parts of the world as the poet knew it in his day, that is, Europe, Asia, and Africa, in order to indicate that Lucifer is master of every part of the globe.” Dante almost certainly conceived of the world as consisting of three continents, and he would have agreed that Satan's dominion extended to all human beings, afflicted as they are by original sin. Yet how do Europe, Asia, and Africa correspond to these particular colors? Lombardi's explanation, in fact, was breathtaking

in all its banality, but it was also revealing of a new conception of the world as constituted not only by people of different nations, regions, and cultures, but indeed by people who were to be distinguished by the different colors of their skin.

Europeans were vermillion, he explained, because this is what “the majority of them have in their faces.”² At first glance this might seem a rather puzzling claim, despite well-worn literary clichés about rosy-cheeked heroes or the beautiful white-and-red faces of Petrarchan ladies. But Lombardi might also be alluding to new taxonomical schemes such as Blumenbach’s, which when it was definitively revised in 1795 would remark that the primary color of human beings was white, and that this whiteness could be properly identified by a “redness of the cheeks rarely found in the other [varieties].” In his *History of the Earth* of 1774, Oliver Goldsmith had similarly written that the complexion of Europeans was the most beautiful because “every expression of joy or sorrow flows to the cheek.” “The African black and the Asiatic olive complexions admit of their alterations also,” he added, “but these are neither so distinct nor so visible as with us; and in some countries the colour of the visage is never found to change.”³

In addition to being white, in other words, Europeans were also, physiologically speaking, “the blushing race,” and the popularity of this term grew when in 1845 an Old Testament scholar even claimed that the Hebrew word for Adam signified “the red.” Such claims were common throughout the nineteenth century; as late as 1924, in a reprint of Edward Tylor’s standard introduction to anthropology first published in 1881, there appeared an assertion that the difference between the light and the dark races was “well observed in their blushing.”⁴

So far so good: Lombardi was able to explain the vermillion face, the face in front, as an allegorical representation of Europeans. And yet there was still the question of that other “between white and yellow” visage, which presumably should represent the third continent, Asia. Worse still, there was no biblical or other ancient authority to fall back on, and travelers’ reports had characterized Asians with a staggering variety of different color terms. Goldsmith, for instance,

called them olive. Lombardi could only put forward the supposedly self-evident fact—which once again was entirely new—that like blushing Westerners and black Africans this was simply the color that Asians really were. “The yellow-colored face,” he continued, represents “the people of Asia on account of the great number there who are of such a color.”⁵

Although blind to the outrageous historical anachronism of this sort of explanation, later interpreters continued to repeat it, even if cautiously. An excellent example is Dorothy Sayers’s once standard English translation published by Penguin in 1949. “The three faces, red, yellow, and black,” she noted, “are thought to suggest Satan’s dominion over the three races of the world: the red, the European (the race of Japhet); the yellow, the Asiatic (the race of Shem); the black, the African (the race of Ham).” In addition to fixing these colors as definitively red, yellow, and black, confidently assumed to be “the three races of the world” in Dante’s time, Sayers also suggested a different but commonly argued medieval tradition stemming from the tenth chapter of Genesis, that the races of the earth originated in the sons of Noah (although this is not actually mentioned in Dante’s passage). Dark-skinned people, for example, were regularly referred to as being marked with “the curse of Ham.” Sayers was not necessarily endorsing these readings, we should note, and she helpfully added an alternative one in which the faces were also “undoubtedly a blasphemous anti-type of the Blessed Trinity.”⁶

Explicitly racial readings of the passage have since fallen out of favor. But they have certainly not disappeared either, as in Mark Musa’s 1996 commentary, where the racial interpretation is not sufficiently explained as unhistorical, and, much worse, as in Elio Zap-pulla’s 1998 translation published by Pantheon, where the footnotes state without comment that “the three colors of the faces may symbolize the races of humanity.”⁷ But I would argue that the history of this passage reveals the particularly difficult problem of fixing *Asians* according to any sort of rigid color scheme. It might have seemed easy enough to find a certain kind of precedent for vermilion Europeans, and Africans had been thought of as dark or black since at least the beginning of the Christian era. But what about a yellow

Asia, not just East Asia but Asia as a whole? Early nineteenth-century readers seized upon it as a means of retrospectively fixing Asian color once and for all, as if the truth of its yellowness had been just as routine at the end of the thirteenth century as it was beginning to be some six hundred years later. Yet it was only at the beginning of the nineteenth century that yellow had been selected from the myriad of other equally (in)appropriate candidates, and it was only at this time that appeals to a yellow Asia could seem every bit as obvious as a black Africa or a blushing Europe. In other words, the most revealing aspect of Lombardi's reading, as well as of those that have continued to mention it, is that it was based on nothing at all.

YELLOW ANCIENT EGYPTIANS

A similar fate is embodied by our second example, which was even more attractive to the early nineteenth century since it was explicitly visual. It concerns the tomb of the Egyptian pharaoh Seti I, discovered in 1817.⁸ Located in the Valley of the Kings in the city of Thebes, the tomb dates from the 19th Dynasty of the Egyptian New Kingdom and was built in the late thirteenth century B.C. Owing to its enormous size, depth, and plethora of wall decoration, including magnificently colored paintings in raised relief, it was easily the most spectacular and widely known Egyptian site until the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in the 1920s. But for early nineteenth-century admirers one set of paintings immediately stood out from the rest, since they seemed to show not only that ancient Egypt had been just as preoccupied with racial difference as was the modern West, but also that the races had actually been depicted according to a very similar system of skin colors.

These paintings are situated in a large pillared chamber depicting a procession, among which appear small groups of men carefully differentiated in terms of their costume, body ornament, headgear, and hairstyle (color plate 3). There are four such groups, including a party of Egyptians themselves, who might be represented as returning prisoners of war. But what really attracted nineteenth-century viewers is that these men were also differentiated in terms of their color. As was

customary in Egyptian self-representations the men were depicted using a red pigment (Egyptian women, incidentally, were generally shown as yellow), but the foreigners were endowed with both lighter and darker tints, and in his narrative of the discovery published in 1820, Giovanni Battista Belzoni identified them as “evidently Jews, Ethiopians, and Persians.” A gargantuan folio of plates also provided lithographs copied after watercolors that were executed on site (color plates 1, 2, and 4).

The vagaries of tourism, plundering, humidity, and dirt have since deteriorated these paintings to such a degree that it is nearly impossible to verify many of the details that Belzoni and his contemporaries claimed to see, including, most notably, the colors. But the paintings became famous at once and were repeatedly touted, much like the passage from Dante, as representations of human ethnicity. And indeed they are. But in the nineteenth century they were treated almost as race samples in a contemporary anthropological textbook, despite the fact that it was far from clear which groups were being depicted and, even more importantly, how that information would have been appreciated by an ancient Egyptian audience. Moreover, since the hieroglyphic tags were imperfectly understood, Belzoni had to rely on other details such as clothing and ornamentation, and as in the case of Satan’s three faces, readers began to claim familiar and supposedly self-evident racial traits.

“The Jews are clearly distinguished by their physiognomy and complexion,” Belzoni tersely noted, “the Ethiopians by their colour and ornaments, and the Persians by their well-known dress.” An anonymous remark included at the end of Belzoni’s narrative agreed, but this author placed even more emphasis on skin color: “red men with white kirtles” (Egyptians), “white men with thick black beards” (Jews), “negroes with hair of different colours” (Ethiopians), and “white men with smaller beards” (Persians). More revealingly, it was also claimed that the figures of the foreigners “exhibit the most remarkable feature of the whole embellishments of the catacomb,” even though there were so many other magnificent paintings spread across numerous rooms, entryways, corridors, and stairwells, including the enormous burial chamber and its dazzling alabaster sarcophagus,

which attracted huge crowds when it ended up on display in London along with other artifacts and a detailed model of the entire tomb.⁹

As in the passage from Dante, however, an explicitly racial reading did not accord very well with nineteenth-century assumptions. The black faces, as always, were immediately identified with Africa, but the Egyptians were red and there were now two white races, Jews and Persians. A solution would soon be offered when the site was visited by Jean-François Champollion, famous for being the first to make significant progress in the deciphering of hieroglyphics. Armed with the ability to read the texts, he suggested identifications that were slightly different, but he also managed to convince himself that ancient Egyptian racial categorizations were essentially indistinguishable from those of the nineteenth century. “We have here before us,” he asserted, “the image of diverse races of men known by the Egyptians”; “here are figured the inhabitants of the four parts of the world according to the ancient Egyptian system.”¹⁰ In other words, it was quickly supposed not simply that these were people with whom Seti had had contact or whom he had vanquished, but indeed that they formed a kind of symbolic tableau of the races of the world, much as Satan’s three faces were said to be plotted on a race-based map.

Once again this notion was not entirely misguided. The paintings appear in the context of a depiction of a funerary narrative known as *The Book of Gates*, which frequently included representations of people from other tribes or nations and from each of the four directions to emphasize that they, too, were sheltered in the realm of the dead.¹¹ A scholar versed in hieroglyphics would naturally be better equipped to place the figures into such a framework, and similar groups were also featured in the nearby tomb of Rameses III, which Champollion also mentioned, and which had been fully opened to tourists and adventurers for more than fifty years before Belzoni had arrived.

But the figures in Seti’s tomb were in a far better state of preservation and, for Champollion, *plus véritable* in their racial differentiation. Indeed, as one reads through his description one can almost see him straining to make them conform as closely as possible to the desired goal of clear and distinct white, black, and yellow peoples. The Egyptians were the center of this universe, identified with the

hieroglyphic tag “Rôt-en-ne-Rôme, the race of men, men par excellence.” They embodied “a dark red color, [are] well proportioned, with a soft physiognomy, slightly aquiline nose, long braided hair, and dressed in white.” The second group, whom Belzoni had identified as Jews, were now called “Asiatics” and labeled “Namou.” Even more strangely, however, they had also become yellow—or, rather, a similar kind of “white and yellow” that had characterized the “Asian” face of Satan. The “Namou,” he wrote, “present a very different aspect: flesh-colored skin tending to yellow or a swarthy hue [*peau couleur de chair tirant sur le jaune, ou teint basané*], a strongly aquiline nose, a black and abundant pointed beard, and short vestments of various colors.” The next group, “about which there can be no uncertainty,” were *nègres* and were designated by the name “Nahasi.” Last were Belzoni’s Persians, whom Champollion labeled “Tamhou,” and they had undergone the most startling transformation of all. For these faces were now said to be “flesh-colored or white-skinned with the most delicate nuance [*couleur de chair, ou peau blanche de la nuance la plus délicate*], the nose straight or slightly arched, blue eyes and blonde or red beards, of tall and willowy stature, dressed in cowhide that still retains the hair, veritable savages tattooed on various parts of their bodies.” For Champollion, that is, this other white race was fantasized not merely as a people from beyond the northern borders of the Egyptian state, but indeed as a representation of straight-nosed, blonde, blue-eyed, and elegant Europeans. While they might be shown as tattooed barbarians (“I am ashamed to say it,” he admitted, “since our race is the last and the most savage of the series”), these men were just as clearly “a race apart”: “our beautiful ancient ancestors.”¹²

After his death in 1832, Champollion’s identifications were then integrated into an introductory volume on Egypt composed by his elder brother and published as part of the popular series *L’univers*. Here the problem of red Egyptians was directly addressed, just as the whole question of race was also incorporated into a larger and hotly debated discussion about precisely what color the Egyptians were. Were they really black Africans, as the ancient Greco-Roman world had considered them to be? This question was of considerable importance if they were to assume their rightful place as an originary

Western civilization. Blumenbach had argued, after examining the evidence of mummies that had been brought to London at the end of the eighteenth century, that they were indeed black, or, according to his particular hierarchy of the races, midway between Caucasians and Ethiopians. A somewhat different theory, dating from at least the middle of the seventeenth century, had claimed that they were related to Asiatics as far away as China, which might even have originated as an Egyptian colony. This was thought to explain the marked similarities between the two cultures, especially their mysterious pictorial languages. Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art*, first published in 1764, echoed these ideas when he noted that "statues, obelisks, and engraved gems show that the form peculiar to [the Egyptians] somewhat resembled that of the Chinese." But Blumenbach countered this view as well; the Egyptians, he wrote, "differ from none more than from . . . the Chinese."¹³

But as many of his contemporaries were to do, the elder Champollion argued that the Egyptians were Moorish and not black at all, and that they differed from Europeans only in that their skin had been "browned" by the climate—a fact that could supposedly be proved by the "well proportioned," "soft," and "aquiline" figures shown in the tomb. His book also included a new engraving showing the six "Peuples connus des Égyptiens": four figures from Seti's tomb and two additional representations of a "Persian" and a "Greek" taken from other sites (figure 1). Skin colors were not delineated here, with the exception of a hatched black figure, perhaps in order to emphasize that the Egyptians were just as white as the others. And regarding the Egyptian figure, specifically, "it is impossible to find . . . any of the traits that characterize the *race nègre*. The facial angle is beautiful, the features are regular, the lips pronounced but well joined, and the rest of the body having a comportment that one recognizes in individuals of the white race."¹⁴

Appeals to such quantitative measurement as facial angle, first proposed by the Dutch anatomist Petrus Camper in the late eighteenth century and developed by J.-J. Virey and J. B. Bory de Saint-Vincent in the nineteenth, were quickly becoming a standard feature of new taxonomies of racial difference. Samuel George Morton went

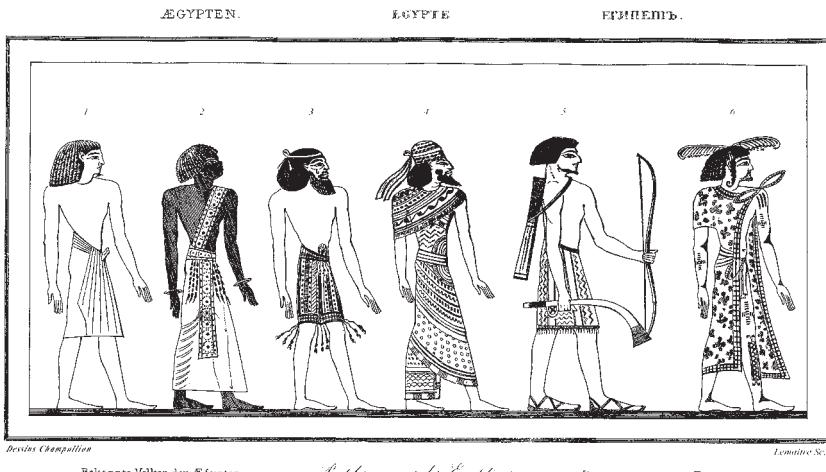


Figure 1: “Peoples Known to the Egyptians,” from Jacques-Joseph Champollion-Figeac, *Égypte ancienne* (1839). With the exception of one dark figure these representations were not differentiated in terms of their skin color. Princeton University Library.

even further when he claimed that human intelligence could actually be measured by skull capacity, and in his volume on the Egyptian evidence, published as *Crania Aegyptiaca* in 1844, he agreed that they were not African. By the time of Henri Brugsch’s *Histoire d’Égypte* of 1859, the “grave and important” question of the origin of the Egyptian people had been (for Brugsch, at least) sufficiently solved: they were now firmly part of the Caucasian race. Henceforth red Egyptians (and yellow Egyptian women) would rarely be interpreted in any literal way, since this was not really their correct skin tone.¹⁵

But the problem of two apparently white races remained, exacerbated by the fact that their skin color varied considerably in nineteenth-century reproductions. In Belzoni’s lithographs the Jews did seem to differ from the Persians and could indeed be called yellowish, but in a competing watercolor produced by Heinrich von Minutoli in 1820, also executed on site and first published in 1827, the hue of the two light-skinned figures was indistinguishable (color plate 5). The same could be said for the lithographs published by Ippolito Rosellini (who had traveled with Champollion) in 1832. Yet

when they appeared in C. R. Lepsius's *Denkmaeler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien*, the result of new expeditions in the early 1840s, the Asians were shown (and indeed described) as yellow-brown and far darker than the Europeans, who were now privileged as the only true white race in the world (see color plate 3).¹⁶ While the Egyptians themselves could not really be red, black Africans, yellow Asians, and white Europeans were thought to be represented with complete accuracy, so much so that by the end of the nineteenth century the paintings in the tomb took on an aura of almost photographic verisimilitude. The Asian faces were now routinely said to *be* yellow, and one particularly imaginative reader, in an essay published in the inaugural volume of the *Annales du Musée Guimet* in 1880, even claimed that those depicted as European had been given *une teinte rosée*—thus verifying that even in the thirteenth century B.C. they were already being recognized as “the blushing race.”¹⁷

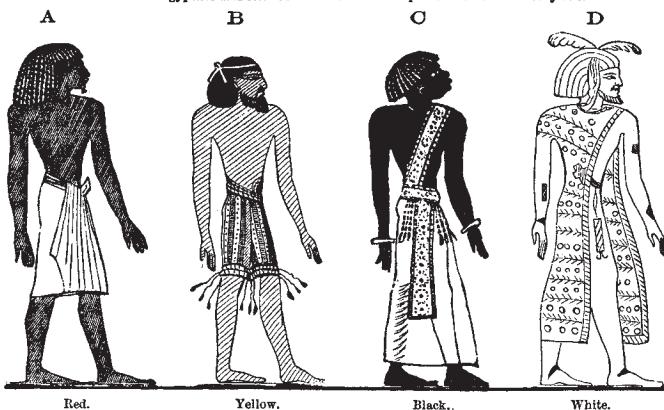
But the real crux for nineteenth-century readers, I would argue once again, was how to colorize the intermediate races that were neither white nor black. Red Egyptians could be easily ignored or explained away, but two apparently white peoples needed to be carefully differentiated. Josiah Nott and George Gliddon's best-selling *Types of Mankind* of 1854 solved this problem by reproducing a plate of the “four species” in which the nonwhite faces were deliberately shaded as three distinct skin tones. Lest we miss the point, the caption clearly identified them as red, yellow, black, and white (figure 2). The paintings, in other words, were now distinguished *solely* in terms of color, but Nott and Gliddon also revealingly pointed out that it was actually the yellow faces that had previously stood in their way. Earlier reproductions, they noted, had not properly distinguished the white from the yellow: “we were always at a loss to account for the presence of *two* white races in Rosellini's copy of this tableau. It turns out that an error of *coloring* on the part of the Tuscan artists was the unique cause of such perplexities; because they have tinted this figure *light flesh-color*, instead of a tawny yellow.”¹⁸

I should point out that the original artists may indeed have chosen to represent the “Namou” with a yellowish pigment, although judging by the figures in the tomb of Rameses III, it is difficult to distinguish

ON TYPES OF MANKIND.

FIG. 1.

The ancient Egyptian division of mankind into four species—fifteenth century B. C.



The above figures, which may be seen, in plates on a folio scale, in the great works of Belzoni, Champollion, Rosellini, Lepsius, and others, are copied, with corrections, from the smaller work of Champollion-Figeac.²⁷ They display the *Rot*, the *Namu*, the *Nahsu*, and the *Tamhu*, as the hieroglyphical inscription terms them; and although the effigies we present are small, they portray a specimen of each type with sufficient accuracy to show that *four* races were very distinct 3300 years ago. We have here, positively, a scientific *quadripartite* division of mankind into *Red*, *Yellow*, *Black*, and *White*, antedating Moses; whereas, in the Xth chapter of *Genesis*, the *symbolical* division of “*SHEM*, *HAM*, and *JAPHET*,” is only *tripartite*—the *Black* being entirely omitted, as proved in PART II. of this volume.

The appellative “*Rot*” applies exclusively to one race, viz., the *Egyptian*; but the other designations may be somewhat generic, each covering certain groups of races, as do our terms Caucasian, Mongol, &c.; also including a considerable variety of types bearing general resemblance to one another in each group, through shades of color, features, and other peculiarities, to be discussed hereafter.²⁸

EXPLANATION OF FIG. 1.

A—This figure, together with his three fac-simile associates, extant on the original painted relief, is, then, typical of the *Egyptians*; who are called in the hieroglyphics “*Rot*,” or Race; meaning the Human race, *par excellence*. Like all other Eastern nations of antiquity—like the Jews, Hindoos, Chinese, and others—the Egyptians regarded themselves alone as the chosen people of God, and contemptuously looked down upon other races, repelling such to be Gentiles or outside-barbarians. The above representation of the Egyptian type is interesting, inasmuch as it is the work of an *Egyptian* artist, and must therefore be regarded as the Egyptian ideal representation of their own type. Our con-

*Figure 2: “The ancient Egyptian division of mankind into four species,” from Josiah Nott and George Gliddon, *Types of Mankind* (1854). The four figures (or rather “species”) from Seti’s tomb are now assigned clear and distinct color labels. Princeton University Library.*

their color from that other white race, the “Tamhou.” In any case, this has nothing to do with the claim three thousand years later that all the peoples of Asia *were* in fact yellow. Presumably, no further proof was required. By the 1880s there would be calls for more evidence to decide the facts once and for all, utilizing the new scientific tool of photography. An 1887 address to the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain concluded by urging its members to obtain “correct photographs of the portraiture of different races still remaining on the walls of the monuments before these most valuable records shall be lost to us for ever.” One might well wonder why this particular aspect of Egyptian art was seen as so important, and in 1912 a major “Fremdvölker-Expedition” was actually carried out, the result being a visit to seventeen different tombs and a collection of nearly 800 photographs, most of which were published in Walter Wreszinski’s *Atlas zur altägyptischen Kulturgeschichte*. But since everyone was predisposed to see the Asians as yellow, yellow they remained, as in Paul Topinard’s influential *Éléments d’anthropologie générale* of 1885, where the images in Seti’s tomb were said to show yellow Asians with aquiline noses and referred to Nott and Gliddon’s *Types of Mankind* for support.¹⁹

A total collapse of historical specificity was now complete. Nott and Gliddon had remarked that “the ancient Egyptians had attempted a systematic anthropology at least 3500 years ago,” and that “their ethnographers were puzzled with the same diversity of types . . . that . . . we encounter in the same localities now.” Alexander Winchell’s *Pre-adamites* of 1880 affirmed “the very high antiquity of the racial distinctions existing in modern times,” and in 1909 A. C. Haddon’s *Races of Man* claimed that ancient Egyptian artists “distinguished between four races” just as “we ourselves speak loosely of white men, yellow men, black men or ‘niggers,’ red men, and so forth.” As late as 1990, Spencer Rogers’s *Colors of Mankind* reproduced a fuzzy version of Nott and Gliddon’s plate and noted, apparently with complete confidence, that “the artists painted figures representing the Egyptians red, the Semites yellow, the Negroes black, and the Mediterranean peoples white.”²⁰

As in the Dante passage the reception of these paintings glaringly demonstrates the way in which early nineteenth-century (and later)

readers regularly projected their own racial preoccupations onto earlier periods as well as onto other cultures, and that one of the assumptions of this mode of thinking was that Asians were yellow. But what we have not yet understood is how that yellowness gradually became a feature associated with *East* Asians and not Asia as a whole. In the chapters that follow we will be questioning not only the history of that color term but how it became a designation for the “Mongolian” Far East. Let us begin, then, by taking stock of exactly how East Asians were described before they became yellow at the end of the eighteenth century.