EURASIAN

Mixed Identities in the United States, China, and Hong Kong, 1842–1943

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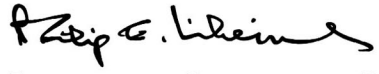

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Eurasian

Children of Yung Kwai and Mary Burnham Yung (a–e) with children of Tong Shao-yi, in the Tong residence, Tianjin, September 1908.

Yung Kwai Papers (MS1795), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. Courtesy of Dana B. Young.

This book is dedicated to my parents.

A Note on Romanization

Most Chinese words in this book have been transliterated into pinyin romanization, with the following important exceptions: personal names of individuals who commonly used Cantonese, Hokkien, or other non-Mandarin names, or are well known by names based on other romanization systems; names of businesses or associations; well-known place names, such as Hong Kong and Macao. A Chinese glossary at the back of the book provides all modern Mandarin pinyin equivalents and Chinese characters, except in the case of well-known place names. Chinese surnames precede given names, and I follow this practice except in cases where individuals adopted Western-style names.

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Prelude

At one point in the early 1990s, I gathered with some Taiwanese friends in a Boston coffeehouse to catch up on the latest gossip, listening with interest to a particularly titillating morsel about a successful thirty-something career woman in Taipei who had decided to become a single mother. She had flown to Los Angeles for the in vitro fertilization (IVF) procedure. While the others debated the stigma of single motherhood, I was preoccupied with this last detail. "Why fly all the way to California?" I asked in surprise. "There are excellent IVF clinics in Taipei." The group of Taiwanese women laughed at my naïveté. The reason she wanted the procedure done in the United States, they informed me, was that she wanted a "Caucasian" sperm donor. Contrary to my assumption, then, what this Chinese woman sought was not American medical science, but American genetic material. Even more surprised, I asked what had compelled her to make this unusual request. Again, the group laughed at my persistent naïveté. Because, of course, they explained, "everyone knows" Eurasian mixed bloods (hunxue'er) *are beautiful and intelligent. Although I have never ascertained whether the child was born, the story has continued to haunt me.*

Having spent my formative years in the United States, with its long history of anti-miscegenation laws (which were only repealed in 1967), I found that my friends' commonsense understanding of the desirability of Eurasian admixture called into question some of my fundamental presumptions concerning the racial order of things.[1] I had to wonder:

How widespread was this attitude—which I found at once liberating and disturbing—among contemporary ethnic Chinese, and what were its historical roots? How did this desire for intermixing coexist with Han Chinese chauvinism, which continues to be a powerful force in the contemporary era, even in the so-called Chinese diaspora? Being myself a child of Chinese–English intermarriage, I had long been aware of the Chinese stereotype that Eurasians are the "most beautiful" and of the popularity of the Eurasian look in the Chinese modeling and entertainment industries.[2] But could this fetishization be so powerful as to prompt people to seek out interracial genetic engineering?

I was forced to revisit the incident in the coffeehouse years later when I came across an article in the weekly magazine *Duowei zhoukan* with the provocative title, "Can Mongrelized Mixed-Bloods Really Improve the Chinese Race?"[3] Written by online pundit Shangguan Tianyi, the article was a commentary on the trend of ethnic Chinese seeking intermarriage with white Americans in order to produce genetically "superior" offspring. My reaction this time around, some ten years later, was shaped by the marked change in climate toward "hybridity" that was palpable both at home in the United States and abroad. By the turn of the new millennium, hybridity had gained cachet—as a theoretical concept, a marketing strategy, and a political issue.[4] No longer taboo: hybridity was now in vogue.

One does not have to look very far in contemporary discourse to find celebratory statements about hybridity, many focusing on "mixed-race" peoples of Asian descent. Suggesting a "Eurasian Invasion," as declared by *Time* magazine in 2001, glamorized images of mixed celebrities from L'Oreal's Asia cover girl Li Jiaxin to champion golfer Tiger Woods and singer Dennis O are ubiquitous in the media.[5] In the United States, college campuses from University of California Berkeley to MIT have established student groups for Asians of mixed heritage, while online forums dedicated to Eurasian issues have targeted virtual communities across the globe. Census 2000 for the first time allowed people to check off multiple race boxes on the census, signaling the official end of the "one-drop rule."[6] The current multiracial buzz is generally attended by much feel-good rhetoric, but it has also generated a great deal of controversy and backlash both in the West and in Asia, with some of the fiercest criticisms coming not only from racial conservatives but also from traditional civil rights organizations.[7] What is it about hybridity that has aroused such intense interest at this historical juncture?

In contemporary cultural politics, the figure of the hybrid subject operates as a metaphor for the simultaneous euphoria and anxiety surrounding the increasing cross-fertilization of cultures, languages, and capital in an age of globalization. Hybridity has even been identified by some critics as *the* characteristic condition of the postcolonial world, a world, as Ien Ang writes, "in which we no longer have the secure capacity to draw the line between us and them, between the different and the same, here and there, and indeed, between Asia and the West."[8]

Yet, as the anecdote with which I began this piece suggests, if hybridity and multiracial chic are being packaged as a new trend in the West, in Greater China this trend taps into a longstanding fetishization of Eurasians, pointing to important cultural differences in constructions of racial "mixedness" despite the global dimensions of the current buzz. Cross-cultural perspectives, however, are rarely reflected in the U.S. media, where intermarriage is currently touted as a cure-all for American racial tensions, a rhetoric memorably exemplified in a Fall 1993 special issue of *Time* that triumphantly declared on its cover—under the visage of a "mixed-race" woman—"The New Face of America: How Immigrants Are Shaping the World's First Multicultural Society."[9]

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These are some of the issues that are at stake in this book, which examines mixed race in an earlier era of globalization.

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