I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Casa Asia for inviting me to join the East West Dialogue and express my own views. I was deeply impressed by the logo of Casa Asia, the Chinese character Ren. As is known to all, Ren refer to the collective concept of people, instead of an isolated individual. Central to the Confucian tenets, Ren indicates the relationship between two people, such as father and son, husband and wife, the superior and the inferior, older brother and younger brother, and friend and friend. He believes that as long as these interpersonal relationships are well maintained, the whole society will be in good order. I think this concept can be applied to the interrelations between the eastern culture and the western culture. In so far as the two can learn and complement each other, the world will be in peaceful order. Hence, Ren, and the spirit of humanities it signifies, serves as a solid platform for east-west dialogue. That is why I like your logo very much. Now I would like to shift my topic to the main theme of today’s discussion: Racism and Xenophobia: Confronting Realities in Asia and Europe.

…Like most other countries in the world, China is also afflicted with racism and xenophobia. Take for instance those Chinese cities where you may have the chance to encounter black people. Discrimination and even disparagement targeted against black people are usually unveiled and undisguised. “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.” Either the recognition of Chinese dating a white or the antipathy of Chinese dating a black is based upon the skin color, belying a notoriously charged biological racism.

…As long ago as in the early 20th century there were some Chinese scholars who ranked yellow race in juxtaposition with whites and superior to blacks and other colored races. However, it was not until the 1980s, when China commenced opening to the outside world, that the chance of direct contact with black people and henceforth unleashing racism came to the Chinese. Therefore, the history of Chinese racism against foreigners has only spanned a short period of time.

…However, entrenched in the long history of China has been xenophobia which legitimizes discrimination or even hostility against other races based on Sinocentricism. The Confucian tradition, which has shaped Chinese culture, emphasizes a dichotomy between “Hua Xia” (an ancient name for China) and “Man Yi” (neighboring barbarians), saying by way of Confucius “They do not share the same blood as we do, so they must be different from us in nature.” Nevertheless, Confucius’s ideal was to civilize those barbarians around with a view to assimilating them into Chinese Han culture. In fact, most of those associated historically with “barbarians” have been interbred with Han people and thus not only Hanized culturally but also constitutionally. In this sense Han people as a nation has never been a pure race undergoing no changes at all in its
Racism originating from Confucian concept of “differences between Han and minorities” is mainly grounded in the cultural superiority rather than any biological superiority in a general sense, which is the key feature of Chinese racism. Today, those minorities like Mongolian, Uigur, Tibetan, and Yi people which still display some very obvious physical differences from Han people all trail behind in economic, cultural and social development. Accordingly, the manifest “Big Han Nationality Chauvinism” bears not so much upon physical superiority as upon social and cultural superiority. In addition, due to the fact that those minorities mentioned above generally live in a compact settlement and maintain very few direct contacts with Han people, the discrimination that Han people harbor against them is not so prevalent and they are denied such a chance either. On the other hand, in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, the largest minority groups living there like Uigur and Manchu have already been highly homogenized. The racism based upon biological sense of race and ethnicity familiarized by western scholars does not present a immense problem in China.

…After half a century’s undesirable and humiliating contact with the outside world, Chinese manifest race superiority deriving from their cultural superiority still has its unique repercussions. Take Japan as an example. A host of Chinese still flirt with such condescending superiority over Japan, although the fact that Japan outperforms China in economy, job achievement, educational level, social morality and the like stares them in the face. The idea that China and Japan share the same ancestry in race and culture sells well in China. Another saying goes that Japanese culture is in the influence circle of Confucianism. As it follows, Chinese culture had always been the cultural mentor of pre-modern Japan. After going through a series of successful social reforms, however, Japan emerged as a strong nation and then invaded its former teacher with streak of gratefulness. Chinese like Japanese products but not Japanese people. The immediate reason lies in the wartime enmity between the two nations, which is manifestation of nationalism rather than racialism. But the root cause is mainly cultural. This kind of cultural superiority is imbedded in the historical discourse and works as a balancing mechanism in the Chinese psyche. Hence, the anti-Japanese mood surging contemporary Chinese youth (except those greatly influenced by Japanese culture) involves both resentment rooted in nationalism and antagonism evolving from cultural superiority. In my recently finished research among undergraduates and graduates in Shanghai, we can see that the worst response occurred when they were asked about the Japanese attitudes towards China. We designed three different answers: being friendly, hostile and neutral. The answers for Japan given by undergraduates and graduates were (friendly) 1.4 % and 1.0%, (hostile) 87.9% and 91.9%, (neutral) 10.3 % and 5.7%, respectively.

…Another important cultural root of Chinese racism is the differentiation of social status, which, also stems from the traditional cultural discrimination. Traditional society is patriarchal and clan-oriented in which superiority/inferiority and intimacy/distance are meted out according to consanguinity, which is inequality within families. Chinese society has five human relationships: the relationship between sovereign and subordinate, between father and son, between husband and wife, between elder brother and younger, and among friends, with blood ties as the axle. Anyone beyond the reach of the five relationships are deemed as “strangers” – “the other” in modern terms -- and will hence be discriminated against, which is another kind of discrimination based upon consanguinity. Importance is also attached to geographic ties in traditional society. Fellow
villagers form the ingroup and dismiss those from different locations as outgroup, which results in geographic discrimination. People from the northern part of Jiangsu province being held in contempt by Shanghai local residents for a long time is a case in point. Education is of great importance in Chinese society; knowledgeable people are respected while those who are not are belittled. Chinese places education above anything else. With good education, one can be superior to others and be the one to rule others. On the contrary, ill-educated people or illiterates are subjected to the rule of others. Confucius distinguished those with good education and high morality and those with poor education and low morality and equate the former with junzi (the Confucian gentleman) and the latter with xiaoren (the trivial person). Hence the discrimination based upon knowledge and education. Chinese imperial power had been lasting for over 2000 years during which people were divided as masters and minions. Masters, as daren, were respected and held in awe while minions, as xioaren, were slighted by others and even themselves. Hence, the senior Shanghai citizens looked down upon Indians because Indians were hired to serve foreigners living in concessions as security guards. This discrimination was also non-racial because many senior Shanghai locals worked for foreigners too and they deemed their jobs, which needed knowledge and skills, superior to those of the Indians, who were then belittled by them as “minions with red hair”. Likewise, Shanghaiese of the new generation looks down upon Philippines because of their stereotypical impression of them as domestic maids for Hongkong people. Although Indians have scored amazing achievements in software industry, the stereotypes elder Shanghaiese have of Indians and the sense of superiority that ensues have not lost their appeals. Because most of the foreigners who are looked down upon are non-whites, this may leave people with a false impression that Shanghai locals’ discrimination is based upon the difference between whites and non-whites. That sounds reasonable to some degree. However, the more deeply rooted reasons are as what have been discussed above. Take the attitude of Shanghai locals towards Koreans, non-whites, as an example. It is not only less contempt but respect and admiration to a larger degree. It is because Koreans impress Chinese with their emerging as leader in such aspects as fashion. That explains the popularity of Korean pop culture in China and its salience in Chinese youth subculture. When asked about the attitude of Korean toward China, Chinese undergraduates and graduates report the following: friendly 51.4% and 40.6%, neutral 45.0% and 52.0%, hostile 3.1% and 5.6% respectively.

…Status-based discrimination wasn’t gone with Mao’s era and post-Mao’s era. Instead, it has evolved into new versions. One key new division was based upon the urban and rural status of one’s birth place. Urban-dwellers were entitled to all that was denied to people living in the countryside: welfare like housing, medic care, education and old-age pension. Peasants in Mao’s era even didn’t have the freedom to migrate to cities. Deng Xiaoping’s reform lifted the restriction on migrant labor. They could look for jobs and live in cities, but could not be registered as the urban residents, hence deprived of the benefits of welfare and other fair treatment available to urbanites. That is the gravest group discrimination in the present China. It is not racism, but it is as black and white as racism. It includes cultural discrimination, -- like people living in the countryside, due to poor rural educational level cannot have accesses to jobs requiring special skills --, but this cannot be summed up as cultural discrimination. For illiteracy and semi-illiteracy of peasants should not be attributed ultimately to cultural but to institutional discrimination. Peasants and urban residents are of neither different races nor different nationalities, but because
of their different household registration, those two groups of people receive markedly different treatment. Peasants from rural areas do the most undesirable and unpleasant jobs from which urban citizen weasel: house constructing and road building. Most of those jobs are physically stressful. However, they can hardly get any other opportunities. Even if they are qualified, they usually cannot make it. Why? Simply because they are from the countryside. For them, five eight-hour workdays and two-day weekends do not apply to them. It’s common for them to work 10, 12 hours a day sometimes even 14 to 16 hours a day without legal holidays because if they take any days off they will not be paid. In my research among those hired nursing assistants in Shanghai’s hospitals, theoretically, they don’t have any break or holiday. They are supposed to work 10, 12 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a year. Why? It’s because they are migrant labors, not formal urban employees. They work so hard but they rank at the bottom of the payroll, whose payments remains the same as what their elders earned twenty years ago. Urban worker’s salaries keep rising annually at different rates while those migrant labors experience no change at all or no substantial improvements. Why? It’s again because they are migrant labors. No medicare, old-age pensions, injury protection insurances and house accumulation fund are included in their payments. They are excluded from all the public welfare programs. Chinese social welfare system has never lent a helping hand to them. Why? It’s because the privileges have always been bestowed upon urban citizens only.

…Chinese have racial discrimination like discrimination against black people. With too few black people in China, it will not be a grave social problem facing China.

…Chinese have discrimination based on ethnicity. For example, Chinese have the sense of superiority to minorities. However, due to the fact that all those minorities groups which have a comparatively large population are dwelling in their compact settlements and under autonomous governing, it is not a big issue, at least to most common Chinese.

…The largest problem of group discrimination in China is not any one of them mentioned above. Instead, it is the fact that the majority population of Chinese society (70%) in the countryside cannot be entitled to the same and equal welfare, treatment and opportunities as the minority population (30%) in the cities. That is the biggest, the most profound and dangerous group splitting force and discrimination. Peasants have never been a racial, but geographical concept. However, under an overarching institutional discrimination, they become a group of secondary or lesser citizenship. I’m afraid that to study Chinese racism and xenophobia requires not only the observation of the discrimination against foreigners and minorities but also the more pressing study of the real-life divide between urban dwellers and peasants and the prevailing discrimination inflicted upon the latter.

This practice of discrimination not only causes the general ostracizing of country people from the social welfare system and the permanence of the social privileges city dwellers enjoy over peasants but triggers big-scale social antagonism. Migrant labors play an indispensable role for a city’s upkeep and development while they are not accepted as part of it and meet discriminated looks. The growing difficulty in identification with the city makes it easy to bear dissatisfaction and grudge against city dwellers. This negativity may find its outlet in revenge-taking through aberrant and law-breaking behaviors. High aberrance and crime rates then invite even more
cautious and repulsive response on the part of urbanites, prompting them to bar every family with
installed prison-like doors and windows from the rest of the world. Hence a city composed of two
groups, filthy with mutual distrust, and rife with touchiness. This completes a vicious circle.