



Hair

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Bring out the beast: body hair in China

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On the margins of civilisation and in the mists of evolution lurk hairy barbarians, furry primates and wild men. But why the fascination? Is it about getting back to our roots, or a fear of the beast within?

In his landmark study, *Soulstealers* (1990), Philip Kuhn offered a riveting account of several cases of sorcery, which shook Chinese society in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Under the prosperous reign of the Qianlong emperor, sorcerers roved the country, clipped off men's queues (long braids or pigtails), and chanted incantations over them to steal the souls of their owners. Fear of sedition lay behind the emperor's prosecution of the soul-stealers, as the queue was a political symbol of allegiance to the ruling dynasty. The symbolic significance of hair on top has been widely recognised by historians of China, but can we find politics in body hair?



LEFT: Cutting off the Pigtail, oil on canvas by **Han Wu Shen** (b. China, 1950)
RIGHT: 19C images of Chinese emigrants to the US. The Cartoon at bottom right refers to an ordinance passed in San Francisco in 1873, forcing men who were imprisoned to have their queue cut. In practice, this violated the law of the imperial government of China which required men to wear a queue. A man with short hair would have trouble returning to China.

If a plurality of ambiguous and often contradictory meanings was ascribed to hair in late imperial China, body hair most commonly symbolised the fragile border separating the human from the beast. As in Christian countries up to the beginning of the nineteenth century, boundaries between man and ape were blurred in imperial China: learned literature, to take one example, compared “red-bearded” Europeans to monkeys, or “macaques” (*mihou*).



Illustration of a baboon from a late imperial encyclopaedia. [[enlarge](#)]

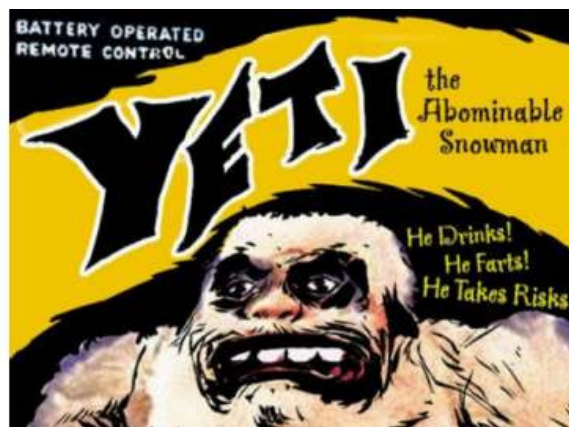
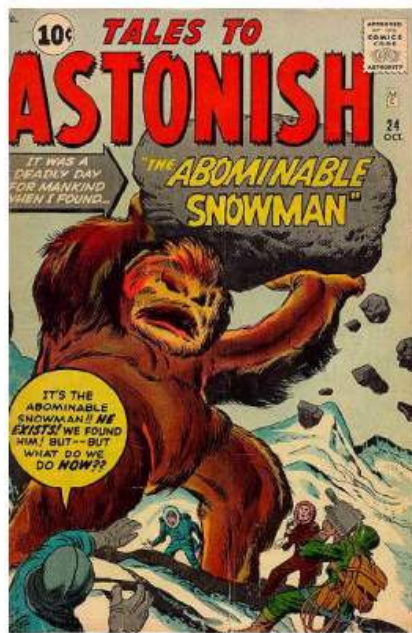
Some animals living within the realm of the empire, on the other hand, were described as wild men with a long tail: although orang-utans (*xingxing*) and baboons (*feifei*) were covered in black hair, they were sometimes held to speak human language.

“Hairy men” (*maoren*) were also reported in the imperial annals. From 1555 onwards, the local gazetteer of Fang county in Hubei province repeatedly mentioned people from the mountains covered in long hair; these reports inspired several vernacular stories by the eighteenth-century poet Yuan Mei.



Trading faces: a case of mistaken identity? Rufus-bearded westerners were nicknamed “macaques”. But which is which? Mirror, mirror...

Where earlier versions in the Daoist tradition saw the acquisition of body hair as a step towards immortality, most of Yuan Mei’s accounts presented excessive hair growth as a transformation away from “civilisation”. Comparable to the myth of the wild man in Europe, the hairy man was located beyond the limits of the cultivated field - in the wilderness, the mountains and forests, the border of human society: he hovered on the edge of bestiality.



On the edge of bestiality, or beyond the limits of belief? Yetis come in all shapes and sizes, but do they actually exist? The abominable truth is out there (snowmen-builders beware)

Interest in body hair as a marker of civilisation was reinforced by the use of evolutionary theories from the end of the nineteenth century onwards. Anthropologists and sociologists in China started to divide humanity into different stages of "racial development".

The "raw" barbarian (*shengfan*), coated with thick hair, and an inhabitant of the dark forests of the mountains, became a symbol for the lowest stage of evolution. A development away from the lower furry species, "half-civilised races" (*ban kaiming minzu*) were thought to have attained the second level of evolution.



The stoned and the beautiful? The Immac conception played out on Jane Fonda's pins. Barbarella meets the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers. So who's hairy now?

In anthropological discourse, the “civilised races” (*kaiming minzu*) were confined to the English and Chinese, spearheads of the evolutionary process: authors frequently noted that both “races” had patches of body hair only on the chest and legs.

Chen Yinghuang, the first professor of physical anthropology at Beijing University, gave examples of “races” that had never evolved beyond the ape-man stage: the overdeveloped hair system of the Ainu, a minority from the Japanese northern island of Hokkaido, became a common illustration of racial regression. A line drawing in Chen Yinghuang's book represented a naked Ainu, heavily bearded and covered with hair from top to toe.



A picture of an Ainu, a member of the indigenous population of Japan, alleged to be covered in hair.

[\[enlarge \]](#)

Wild men and monsters

In an age spellbound by the implications of evolution, reports about “monsters” covered with hair appeared regularly for the amazement of the public. As in modern Europe, malformations and so-called ‘freaks’ had a popular appeal, shared by different levels of society, and were exhibited on fairground stalls and offered to the public gape. In 1921, a certain Miss Wang gave birth to a hairy baby, later exhibited in the Agricultural Experimental Ground of Beijing. The same year, photographs of Chinese “hairy man” Li Baoshu were put on display in the capital's zoo.



Making a spectacle of ourselves. A variant of the crowd-puller: if it moves, watch it and cast your votes.

The Cockpit, 1759, engraved etching by [William Hogarth](#)

From the imperial reports about hairy men to the popular exhibitions in Republican China, the fascination with the abnormal was localised and domesticated in the construction of the “monster”.

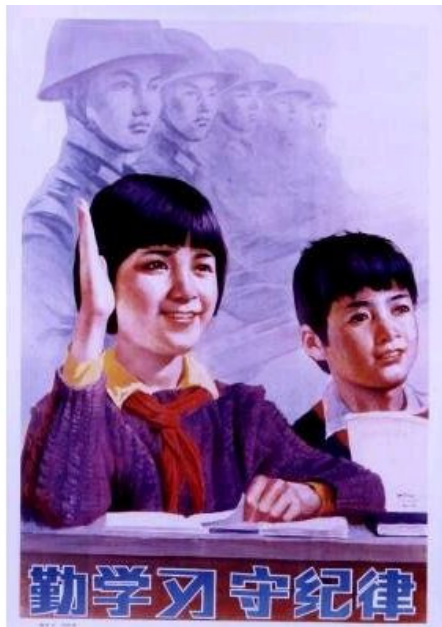
Representations of the “hairy monster” came most clearly to express the fear of physical disintegration and racial reversion back into the darkness of time.

Fascination with body hair did not disappear after the victory of the communists in 1949. “Hairy men” in particular became objects of marvel during the 1970s and ’80s. A

collection of photographs of thirty-two cases from China was even published in 1982. The greatest part of the book focused on Yu Zhenhuan, a stunning case of hypertrichosis whose development had been closely charted by a team of scientists. Covered with long hair on most parts of the body, Yu Zhenhuan was taken as the most pristine example of a “racial reversion”.



Hairy man Li Baoshu, put on display in Beijing's zoo during the 1920s. [[enlarge](#)]



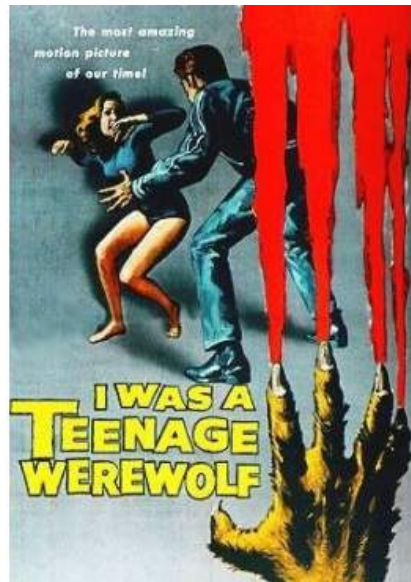
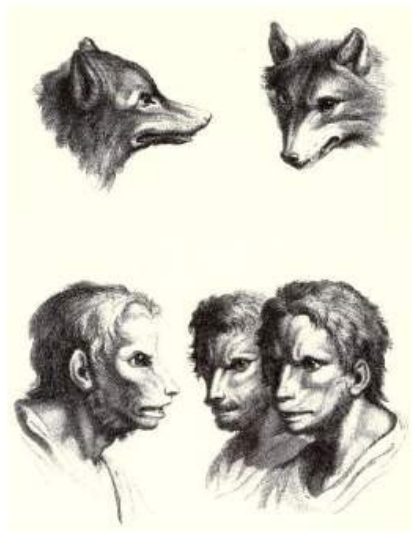
LEFT: Chinese **propaganda poster** from 1986: "study diligently, observe discipline"
RIGHT: *The hairy child Yu Zhenhuan, national symbol of a "racial" reversion.*

Yu Zhenhuan rapidly became an object of marvel and wonder: news on television, reports in the official press, feature articles in more popular magazines brought images of the "hairy child" to the general public. A widely distributed work, *Mysteries of the human body* (1989), to take but one instance, reported in compelling detail the story of Yu Zhenhuan.

Officially sponsored research into the "mystery of the wild man" also became prominent in the 1980s. Most noticed were reports about the "wild man" (*yeren*) from Shennongjia in Fang county, Hubei province, a place where hairy creatures had been sighted since the Ming dynasty. If the hairy barbarian of imperial knowledge had been a spatial notion projected onto the periphery of civilisation, modern versions presented the wild man as the repository of a lost phylogeny, the "missing link" between the ape and the human: hair had become a symbol of borders in time.

Represented as the vessel of evolutionary traits, which had disappeared with civilisation, the scientific analysis of the wild man's hair was thought to reveal prehistoric conditions of life. The findings of a tuft of brown hair in 1980 and remains of more than 3000 "red hairs" of the "wild man" from Shennongjia were scrutinised. A research team concluded that its hair was structurally comparable to that of humans: "We infer that the hair from these 'wild men' could belong to an as yet unknown higher primate".

Reports about the wild man also became rife in the popular press during the 1980s, one example being a daily newspaper's article about a girl abducted by a wild man who later escaped back to "civilisation" with her two shaggy children. In 1986, the Science Evening Paper even brought to the attention of the public a "wild boy" coated with hair recently discovered near the Himalayan mountains and kept hidden in a military hospital of Shaanxi province as a living fossil. Illustrations of the "wild man", based on "scientific data", became an intrinsic part of popular urban culture by the end of the 1980s.

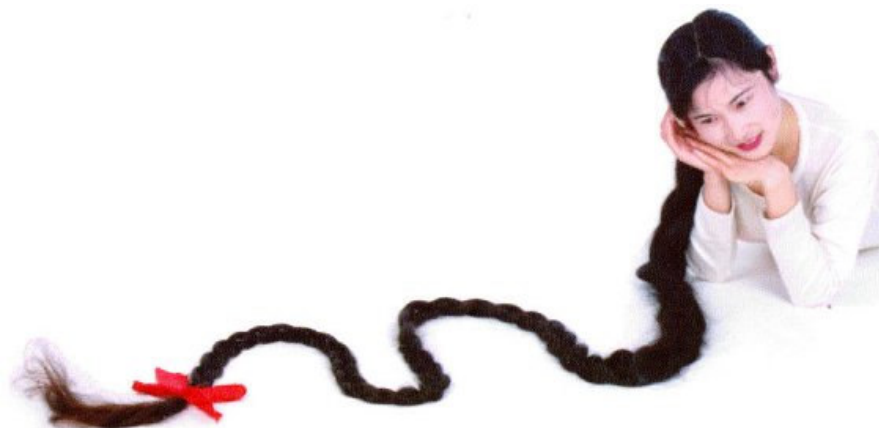


The stages of man? Charles Le Brun's 18C wolfmen, to schlock-horror werewolves.

From a symbol of the geographically remote barbarian hovering on the edge of civilisation in the imperial period, body hair now represents a racial atavism, a throwback to distant stages of evolutionary development long transcended by a superior socialist nation.



Artist's impression of the wild man from Shennongjia.



Tie a red ribbon: a thing of beauty, or an act of sedition? The story of hair just keeps on growing...

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