

Neo-Racism in China: Reasons for China's Otherwise Inexplicable Modern Day Racism

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A senior official I had the opportunity to meet with in a social gathering animatedly told me how much Chinese people would love me. “You’re a dual citizen, correct? Yes, if you present yourself as an American, you’ll get a pretty standard reaction, but say you’re a person from Africa, and they’ll *really* give you the royal treatment. Yes, Chinese people *love* Africans.”

While, this took me by surprise, I did not examine the notion too closely. After all, it would be a nice change in comparison to the perception of Africans in America.

First, I will be dissecting what exactly neo-racism against black people looks like in China and what events prove this trend. Second, I will analyze what factors and historical events led a largely nationalist country to be discriminatory against people of African descent. I would soon find out that while this “royal treatment” may occur sometimes, overt racism comes in many forms in China, and takes place every day against black people.

Chinese Racism against Black People in Popular Media

The largest forms of Chinese racism towards black people can be seen in popular media. Later, I was indeed in China when a certain headline started making its way within my friend circle and on social media: “Chinese Museum Pulls Exhibit Comparing Animals to Black People” (Wu and Goldman 2017). According to the *New York Times*, a Chinese photographer set up an exhibit in the Hubei Provincial Museum of Wuhan. The photographer juxtaposed images of black Africans with images of wild animals. Amongst the comparisons were “a young boy and a howling chimpanzee, each photographed with their mouths agape. Other sets paired a man and

a lion, both gnashing their teeth; and a man and a baboon” (Wu and Goldman 2017). This sparked obvious outrage amongst black Chinese residents and students on foreign exchange programs.

Digital Media and Racist Ideology in China

Up until this point, I had only suffered through overly inquisitive fingers in my hair, curiosity about my skin color, and many comments in Chinese that, unbeknownst to the commentators, I understood, but I chalked it all up to curiosity. After all, many older generation Chinese people would have never seen a black person in person until very recently. Could one chalk up an incident this overtly racist to ignorance?

In the age of hyper-interaction, digital media is increasingly becoming a platform on which to share notions and ideologies - a platform that the Chinese are also using to propagate racist ideology. This is seen in a racist advertisement that was able to make waves worldwide.

Racism against Black People in Advertisements

During the summer of 2016, the black-Chinese racial relations saw turbulence in the light of an advertisement for laundry detergent. The laundry detergent in question, Qiaobi, depicted a Chinese woman beckoning a black man over in a sensual manner, and as he arrived, throwing him into the washing machine along with a Qiaobi detergent packet (Aljazeera 2016). A Chinese man subsequently coming out, apparently “cleaned.” This advertisement, implying that the black man needed cleaning, sparked outrage first amongst black people in China, eventually making its rounds worldwide.

Anti-Black Rhetoric – In Translation

What is to blame for this misfortune? When China started dealing with the United Kingdom and later the United States, it was privy to a lot of anti-black rhetoric. Where else then would they get their cues from?

Evidence of this can be seen in the recent snafu WeChat underwent regarding its translation mistake. According to *That's Shanghai*, a news outlet based in Shanghai, WeChat (China's most popular source of social media) had to issue an apology to its users after one of them noticed that the app was translating the neutral term *hei laowai*, meaning "black foreigner," into the racist n-word slur (Linder 2017). Upon further investigation, *That's Shanghai* found out that the translation was not indiscriminate of context. The translation of *hei laowai* to the n-word happened only when the sentence had negative contexts such as "thief," "late," and "lazy." However, when positively or neutrally contextualized by phrases such as "cool" and "strange," *hei laowai* simply translated to "black foreigner." This indicates an obvious prejudice against black people even in translation technology. An obvious offense to many of China's black community, it begs the question how this happened in the first place, and why it took 6 years for this translation error to be caught.

Many translation services automated by Artificial Intelligence bots source their translations by feeding the programs "huge amounts of data" in order to train the AI to find the best translation (Haas 2017). This explains why WeChat's translations came out the way they did based on the context of the sentence. With increasing globalization and cultural exchange, in addition to the hyper evolution of internet and media growth particularly in western world countries, it makes sense that a lot of the information and data they would be feeding their AIs would be western biased. This would explain why the large pool of data the bots had to work with all generated the racist translation for "dark foreigner."

With America and Europe's drive to document everything, there is likely to be more information about black people painted as the inferior race than there is otherwise.

Sourcing Information and Trends from the West

Marketus Presswood illuminates this issue further, saying that "Unlike their parents and grandparents, China's youth have grown up with access to information, entertainment, and art from all over the world. Many have consequently come to reconsider stereotypes of black people, and they are in turn influencing the opinions of their older, more "traditional" relatives"

(Presswood 2013). And while they may be privy to positive portrayals, that means that they are equally privy to the astronomically higher proportions of negative portrayals. If this is the information China has to work with, it is no surprise when translations and ideas like this travel.

Within the last few years, China has become a part of the global village, and a side effect is that they are sourcing their information regarding other world parties from the roots of America's ugly racial history.

Ignorance Chinese People Have about Black People

A perhaps more understandable reason for the racism black people experience in China is the large amount of ignorance Chinese people have about black people. Many black people document their experiences of being grabbed at, being asked why they do not just take a shower, and people pulling at their hair. Two Senegalese journalists, Madeleine Thiam and Christelle Mbaya, document their experience with *Quartz* saying, "Sometimes people pinch their noses as I walk by, as if they think I smell. On the subway, people often leave empty seats next to me or change seats when I sit down," says Thiam. She goes on to say that "Women have come up to rub my skin, asking if it is 'dirt' and if I've had a shower" (Chiu 2017).

Humiliation Suffered through Relationship with UK as Cause? Opium War

A second reason China continues to manifest racism can be traced back to the humiliation it suffered through relationships with the United Kingdom. Leading up to the 18th century, China and the United Kingdom were trading partners, with China exporting "Chinese tea, silks, and porcelain pottery" (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016). The trade partnership was largely imbalanced, however, because there was correspondingly "little demand in China for Europe's manufactured goods" (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016), which resulted in Britain selling Indian grown opium in China. This created a Chinese addiction to opium and a reliance on importation to feed it, a reliance Britain greatly profited from (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016). Despite several embargo measures during the Qing dynasty, the opium trade continued to rise, which resulted in two opium wars - last ditch efforts to reclaim China from the opium clutch, both of which the Qing dynasty lost (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016). It

was during the same time period that the “Scramble for Africa” was taking off. In an effort to overcompensate for a humiliating loss to Britain and France at the end of the Second Opium War, as well as the concession of territories, it makes sense that China would choose to discriminate against anyone they could consider lesser than them, including the already mistreated Africans (Pletcher 2017). China, a very nationalist country, and very proud of it, was happy to treat Europe's other colonial victims as people beneath them, in order to boost their confidence.

Native Ethnocentrism

If one puts aside the ignorant curiosity, he or she sees that ethnocentrism is still a large part of Chinese culture and a large driving force behind the racism black people experience in China. This is seen in high political ranks and political rhetoric, as evidenced by Pan Qinglin, a Chinese politician. According to *The Quartz*, the politician took to reporters in early 2017 with a proposal of “how to solve the problem of the black population” in China’s province of Guangdong (Chiu 2017). He cited black people as the source of “AIDS and Ebola virus that is transmitted through bodily fluids” (Chiu 2017). This sentiment is heard by many, and it trickles down and blankets populations with irrational fear of Africans and black people.

China’s Trade and Presence in Africa – Yet Negative Views Continue

Considering that China is Africa’s current largest trading partner, one would hope that all Chinese people do not continue to propagate negative views of their international trade partners (Shinn 2007). Many Chinese are comfortable crossing the ocean in order to further Chinese endeavors in Africa, but are far less pleased by black coming to China to make a living.

According to my adjacent professor, David H. Shinn, the “January 2006 African Policy statement proposed a decades-long comprehensive agenda that has been well received... It began to encourage China in order to help build infrastructure in African countries” (Shinn 2007). He goes on to say that while China does not openly emphasize its quest for African natural resources, “most observers believe... it is the single most important factor driving the relationship.” In fact, one third of China’s oil imports comes from Africa (Shinn 2007). Marketus

Presswood, an African American who came to China to find work as an English teacher with a language company, recounts racial discrimination in the workplace. He explains that the longer he worked there, the higher the demand for specifically “white teachers” rose, until he was out of work. Often, he said, many students would even take a white non-native English speaker over a black native English speaker (Presswood 2013).

Assumed Racial Superiority over Black People

The implied sense of racial superiority over black people is a troublesome trend that does not seem to be stopping anytime soon. As politician Pan Qingling continued to talk to reporters, he said, “China will change from a nation-state to an immigration country, from a yellow country to a black-and-yellow country” (Chiu 2017). This mentality that drives millions to the notion that it is okay for Chinese businesses to venture out to Africa and use black resources, but not okay for the roles to be reversed for fear of muddying Chinese bloodlines, is the exact kind of mentality that black people unknowingly sign up for only to face a rude awakening.

China, a historically sino-centric society, has a history of racism and discrimination that often gets left out of the racial discussion. As China has been expanding its reach in Africa, becoming the continent’s largest trading partner, many Africans and black people worldwide are simultaneously choosing to find work in China, to their dismay. The reason they face so much discrimination from China is largely due to the fact that China as a society has been trying to make up for its loss to Britain and France at the end of the second Opium War. In order to maintain a sense of superiority, they exact demeaning behaviour over an already marginalized continent. Another added factor is seen China’s increasing access to social media and western entertainment, most of which is unfavorable to black people. As China continues to move forward in the world, especially with its relations with Africa, its discrimination against black people will prove fatal.

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