Africans in China, Western/White Supremacy and the Ambivalence of Chinese Racial Identity

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Abstract

This article seeks to provide further insights into understanding the construction of Chinese identity by bringing the West/white into the picture of Afro-Sino racial relationships. It contends that the Chinese have internalized Western/white superiority through a long historical process, starting with the Western invasion in the 19th century and continuing with the construction of the contemporary historical narrative of the "century of humiliation." This internalization and its ramifications can be observed in Chinese public discourses as well as diplomatic practices. Together with Western/white superiority, the Chinese also adopted a social Darwinist, competitive world view, using Western modernity as the yardstick by which to rank different peoples and societies in a racial hierarchy. Chinese racism against Africans is thus a projection of a harsh self-judgement. Unlike white supremacy in Western racial thinking, "Chinese supremacy" is often coupled with an inferiority complex.

摘要：本文将"西方/白人"这一面向引入对中非种族关系的考量，并期从这一角度为中国人之身份认同如何建构的问题提供新的洞见。本文认为，自清末西方入侵，至今日百年国耻之历史叙事的构建，在漫长的历史过程中，西方或白人至上主义已为中国人所内化。这一内化及其影响在中国公众讨论及外交实践中均有体现。除西方或白人至上主义之外，中国人也普遍接受了社会达尔文主义的竞争性世界观，以及一种以西方现代性为标准来排列世界各族人民及社会之高低贵贱的种族梯阶。因此，中国人对非洲人的种族主义是其苛刻自我评判的一种外在投射。与西方种族思想中的白人至上主义不同，所谓"中国优越"之观念常与某种自卑心理相伴随。

Keywords: Chinese identity; Africans in China; white supremacy; historical narrative; wolf-warrior diplomacy; *suzhi*
关键词：中国身份认同; 在华非洲人; 白人至上主义; 历史叙事; 战狼外交; 素质

In April 2020, international media widely reported on discrimination against Africans in Guangzhou in the campaign to control the Covid-19 pandemic: mandatory quarantine and testing, denial of service in commercial venues and hotels, and eviction by landlords.[1] This episode, later known as "the Guangzhou incident," once again put Africans in China, and Chinese attitudes towards them, under the spotlight.

Guangzhou and its surrounding areas host the largest African presence in China. This is an extremely diverse population comprising individuals from almost every African country. They are mostly traders and entrepreneurs, who purchase small consumer goods in China and ship them to Africa for sale.[2] While national statistics are unavailable, in 2014 local authorities

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1 Marsh, Deng and Gan 2020; Vincent 2020; "'If you're black you can't go out': Africans in China face racism in Covid-19 crackdown." *France 24*, 11 April 2020, https://www.france24.com/en/20200411-if-you-re-black-you-can-t-go-out-africans-in-china-face-racism-in-covid-19-crackdown. Accessed 5 April 2021.

2 Lan 2017, 2.

announced that there were 16,000 Africans residing in Guangzhou.[3] In 2017, the number fell to 10,344 according to the Guangzhou Public Security Bureau, which also announced a significant decline in the number of undocumented foreigners.[4] In 2020, official statistics counted 3,642 foreign residents in Yuexiu 越秀 district, a residential area favoured by African communities.[5] This reported decline is in line with my observations during my field work, when social workers who had been working with Africans since the early 2010s and local residents all reported a decline in the number of Africans, especially undocumented ones, since 2016. In recent times, it appears that the majority of Africans in Guangzhou have valid visas, and the increased sur-veillance post-Covid-19 is likely to make it even more difficult for undocumented migrants to remain.[6]

Even though the number of African migrants has declined in recent years and the future of African mobility in China is uncertain, their presence in China has already challenged the imagin-ing of a homogeneous Chinese society held, as a matter of fact, by many Chinese. It has also exposed issues of race and racism in China, which were less visible when China was closed to the outside world. In response, studies on Africans in China have increased since the early 2000s, mapping out the general profile of Africans in China,[7] providing different frameworks through which to understand their presence, and seeing their communities as socio-cultural "bridges,"[8] "an ethnic enclave"[9] or a "transient neighborhood."[10]

More specifically on race and racism, earlier works by historians sought to debunk the assump-tion that racial prejudice was only a "white" phenomenon, or that Chinese racial thinking was a result of "Western influence," but indeed already existed in pre-modern China.[11] Later works on contemporary racial discourses and attitudes in China criticized the prevailing denial of racism, pre-senting ample evidence to support the argument that it did indeed exist within China.[12] More recent literature carries the debate further, from documenting "racism as incident" to emphasizing the historical processes of racialization.[13] Borrowing the concept of "triangulation" from Claire Jean Kim's model concerning Asian Americans vis-à-vis white and black people in the US context,[14] scholars have noted that Afro-Chinese racialization is never binary but triangular, with the West and whiteness always as a reference.[15] Jamie Monson proposes to examine the Afro-Chinese racial-ization processes beyond the binary categories of "Africanness" and "Chineseness" and include also "whiteness."[16] Shanshan Lan's study places these processes within the larger context of triangular power relations between Africa, China and the West.[17]

Taking on this idea of "triangulation," this article brings the West/white back into the picture of Afro-Sino racial relationships and by so doing provides further insights into the construction of

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3 Zhuang 2014.

4 "Zai Guangzhou Feizhou guojia renyuan jiangzhi 10,344 ren, da jinnian zuidizhi" (The number of Africans in Guangzhou drops to 10,344, the lowest number in recent years). *Sina*, 13 March 2017, http://news.sina.com.cn/o/2017-03-13/doc-ifychavf2645633.shtml. Accessed 14 June 2021.

5 "Guangzhou Yuexiuqu huiying shiwan waiji renshi juzhu chuanwen" (Yuexiu district of Guangzhou responds to the rumour that it houses 100,000 foreign residents). *People's Daily* on *Weibo*, 7 April 2020, https://weibo.com/2803301701/ICcjAbJ97?sudaref=news.sina.com.cn&type=comment#_rnd1617547006156. Accessed 18 May 2021.

6 Castillo and Amoah 2020.

7 Bodomo 2012.

8 Bodomo 2010.

9 Li, Zhigang, Lyons and Brown 2012.

10 Niu et al. 2020.

11 Dikötter 2015; Wyatt 2009.

12 Cheng 2019; Sautman 1994; Johnson 2007.

13 Monson 2013, 4; Lan 2017; Sautman and Yan 2016.

14 Kim 1999.

15 Monson 2013; Castillo 2015; Mathews, Lin and Yang 2017; Sautman and Yan 2016.

16 Monson 2013.

17 Lan 2016, 312.

Chinese identity. It will demonstrate how the Chinese internalized Western/white superiority through a long historical process, from the Western invasion in the 19th century to the contemporary narratives of the "century of humiliation." It will then illustrate this internalization and its ramifications by examining Chinese public discourses and diplomatic practices. It contends that together with Western/white superiority, the Chinese adopted a social Darwinist world view, using Western modernity as the yardstick by which to rank different peoples and societies in a racial hierarchy. As such, the Chinese construct their identity in relation to both a Western/white and a non-Western/non-white Other. I conclude by reflecting on how this helps us to understand the peculiarities of Chinese racial thinking and the influence of global white supremacy.

The article draws mainly from two sources of data: interviews and conversations with interlocutors, and internet sources, especially social media content. I conducted 15 semi-structured interviews virtually from July to September 2020. Interviewees included four Africans, one African American and ten Chinese. Chinese interviewees included social workers and volunteers who were helping Africans in Guangzhou during the pandemic, as well as Chinese residents in Guangzhou without direct and regular contact with Africans. I also use data gathered during field research in China in 2019 and 2021. My data collection is not based on a "sampling logic" seeking representativeness, but on a "case study logic" that seeks to uncover the different elements and mechanisms that are at play in the social processes under examination.[18]

Data from internet sources are drawn from regular observations of popular Chinese social media platforms, primarily *Weibo* 微博 and *Zhihu* 知乎. *Weibo* is the Chinese equivalent of Twitter, with nearly 600 million monthly active users.[19] *Zhihu* is a Quora-like platform, with 100 million monthly active users.[20] While both are among China's major platforms of political discussion, *Zhihu* users are largely middle class and better educated than the average Chinese netizen and mostly live in first- and second-tier cities.[21] In general, internet users are younger and more urban than the general Chinese population at large.[22] In recent years, the rise of nationalist and racist online content has been the subject of much scholarly discussion.[23]

This article uses the terms "black people" and "Africans" interchangeably, in accordance with the way they are used in the Chinese language in daily life and in the media. The Chinese term that is most often used is *heiren* 黑人 (black people). Black and African identities are usually conflated. Arab-speaking, lighter-skinned North Africans are usually identified as whites or Arabs, not as Africans.[24]

Chinese Racial Nationalism, Internalization of Western/White Supremacy and "Supra-national" Treatment

Racial thinking was embedded in the Chinese nation-building process. In the late 19th century, faced with increasing foreign encroachment following the first Opium War (1839–1842), *wangguo miezhong* 亡国灭种 (loss of state and racial extinction) became a national concern as well as a

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18 Small 2009, 24–25.

19 See https://www.statista.com/statistics/795303/china-mau-of-sina-weibo/. Accessed 10 February 2023.

20 "Zhihu caibao li de liangdian yu yinyou" (Highlights and concerns in *Zhihu*'s financial statements). *Ofweek*, 16 March 2022, https://iot.ofweek.com/2022-03/ART-132215-8420-30553708.html. Accessed 10 February 2023.

21 Zhang, Chenchen 2020, 96; "Zhihu yonghu huaxiang shendu fenxi" (In-depth analysis of the image of *Zhihu* users). *Ifeng*, 24 March 2021, https://i.ifeng.com/c/84sBWqk8wMs. Accessed 10 February 2023.

22 According to official statistics, among China's 1 billion internet users, only 293 million live in rural areas. See "'Shuzi' dianliang meihao shenghuo – toushi di 50 ci 'Zhongguo hulianwangluo fazhan zhuangkuang tongji baogao'" ("Digital' lights up lives: peering into the 50th "China internet development statistics report"). *Xinhua*, 31 August 2022, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-08/31/content_5707608.htm. Accessed 20 February 2023. *Weibo* reported that 80% of its users were born in the 1990s or 2000s. See "Weibo 2020 yonghu fazhan baogao: yonghu qunti jixu chengxian nianqinghua qushi" (2020 *Weibo* annual users development report: users continue to become younger). *Sina*, 12 March 2021, https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/2021-03-12/doc-ikkntiak9143019.shtml. Accessed 10 February 2023.

23 See, e.g., Cheng 2011; Zhang, Si 2021; Fang and Repnikova 2018.

24 Lan 2016, 305.

powerful slogan with which to unify the people. On the one hand, race replaced cultural identity and became the most common symbol and tool for national unity.[25] On the other hand, Chinese intellectuals borrowed the notion of "race" and Western racial theories to reconstruct a new position for China in the world. From the 1890s onwards, leading Chinese intellectuals like Liang Qichao 梁启超 and Tang Caichang 唐才常 began disseminating a five-category classification of humanity according to skin colour (yellow, white, red, brown and black).[26] They accepted the idea of a racial hierarchy, albeit with the "yellow race," to which the Chinese belonged, put on an equal footing with the "white race"; all other races were considered inherently inferior. Faced with the threat of *wangguo miezhong*, they viewed world affairs as a ruthless competition between races and developed the idea of "racial wars" (*zhongzhan* 种战) in which the yellow race would be the ultimate and sole rival of the white race.[27]

Following China's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War, Chinese reformers systematically used these discourses to demonstrate that reform was both necessary and feasible. Japan's success in emulating the West, and especially its victory in the Russo-Japanese War, provided further evidence of the potential of the yellow race. Western discourses on the "yellow peril," introduced to China via Japan, were reappropriated to prove the strength of the yellow race. Notably, Chinese intellectuals tended to ignore the role of Japan in these Western discourses and matter-of-factly positioned the Chinese as the leading force among the yellow races.[28] In positioning the "yellow race" as the only qualified competitor of the whites, with the Chinese as the leader or the "genuine yellow," these discourses reconstructed the Chinese identity and comfortably placed the Chinese on a level with the "whites" and above all other "races."

These racial ideas, developed in the late 19th century, were closely linked to the Chinese adoption and adaptation of Western theories of evolution. Following Yan Fu's 严复 early introduction of evolutionary theories, Chinese intellectuals were particularly drawn to the idea of a struggle for survival and consistently applied it to human society, particularly in the context of "racial wars."[29] Such ideas also laid the foundation for the later acceptance of Marxist historical materialism by early Chinese communists.[30] Later, a Marx-Engels version of cultural evolution was introduced to the Chinese education curriculum and instilled into generations of Chinese. A ladder-like vision of history, with steps representing "the formations of human society from low level to high level," remains at the core of the teaching of history in China today.[31] As a result, ranking societies, nations, groups and "races" in a hierarchy of "civilization" is nothing but normal in China.

On the other hand, Marxist internationalism discourses in the Mao era stressed a Third World solidarity that transcended racial boundaries and condemned racism as an evil of colonialism and Western imperialism.[32] However, such discourses posited China as defending the Third World from Western imperialism and capitalism.[33] Seemingly opposed to the "racial hierarchy" put forward in the late 19th century, these discourses still reflected an ideological framework that positioned China/Chinese as equal rivals to the West/whites, with Africa/Africans as passive victims waiting to be saved.

In contemporary China, racial thinking still underpins Chinese nationalism, and "race" has been used to mark the outer boundaries of the "Chinese people" and the Chinese nation.[34] What is more

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25 Dikötter 2010.
26 Dikötter 2015, 47–49.
27 Yang 2010, 86–91.
28 Ibid., 93–97.
29 Dikötter 2015, 62–68.
30 Li, Bo 2008.
31 Ministry of Education of the PRC 2022, 6.
32 Fenell 2013.
33 Shen 2009.
34 Dikötter 2010.

subtle and less discussed in the literature is that Chinese racial nationalism is also characterized by an internalization of Western/white superiority. This internalization has played, and is continuing to play, a powerful role in the shaping of a Chinese national-racial identity and in the formation of Chinese attitudes towards Africans.

I take the discourse of "supra-national treatment" (*chaoguomin daiyu* 超国民待遇) as an example to illustrate this point. The term "supra-national treatment" originally referred to privileges like tax exemptions, investment refunds, etc. accorded to foreign investment in China. These incentives were an important means to attract foreign investment at the beginning of China's reform and open-up era. At the turn of the 21st century and with China's economic growth established, whether and how to end such preferences came under discussion. Negative consequences of "supra-national treatment" and "reversed discrimination" on national industry were highlighted, and the term itself started to be imbued with a sense of injustice.[35]

As the 2010 Enterprise Income Tax Law marked the end of preferential tax regimes for foreign investments, the application of "supra-national treatment" in terms of economic privileges gradually dwindled. Nevertheless, the term took on a new life and came to be increasingly used in nationalist and xenophobic discourses in reference to any perceived "privileges" accorded to foreigners. In recent years, it has been increasingly used in anti-black discourses. During the pandemic, it became a catchphrase in voicing discontent relating to, and hostility against, Africans and black people. The Guangzhou incident occurred following a report by local public security that a Nigerian man, who had been hospitalized with Covid, had attacked a nurse, pushing her to the ground and biting her face, when she had tried to perform a blood test on him.[36] Several days later, Guangzhou reported five new positive cases, all Nigerians; four of them had frequented the same African restaurant shortly before being tested positive.[37] Around the same time, an incident in Shandong caught national attention. At a Covid-19 testing point, three Americans jumped the queue – and the staff allowed it. When the Chinese protested, one of the Americans, a black man, shouted at them, allegedly saying "Chinese get out."[38]

When international media criticized the discrimination against Africans in China, the "misbehaviour" of foreigners, and especially of black people, was the focus of the Chinese media. The public was watchful that these foreigners would not be treated more leniently than the Chinese, who were subject to draconian anti-Covid measures. The incident in Shandong triggered a widespread angry response on *Weibo*, and "supra-national treatment" was the main complaint. The anger of the netizens was not even primarily directed against the black man, but rather at the reaction of the staff, who allegedly asked the Chinese there to "give (me) some face" (*gei dian mianzi* 给点面子, meaning "help me and do not make a scene") by tolerating the queue-jumpers.[39] As one *Weibo* user put it, even though the "foreign trash" (*yang laji* 洋垃圾) was in the wrong, the real problem was the chronic "kneeling and licking" (*guitian* 跪舔) on the side of the authority.

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35 See, e.g., Li, Baofeng 2004; Chen and Li 2003.

36 "Yi waiji xinguan feiyan huanzhe dashang hushi bei Guangzhou jingfang xingshi li'an diaocha" (A Covid-19 patient of foreign nationality injured a nurse – Guangzhou police have started a criminal investigation on the case). *Xinhua*, 2 April 2020, http://www.moj.gov.cn/pub/sfbgw/zwgkztzl/fkyqfztx/fkyqfztxyqpf/202103/t20210312_195703.html. Accessed 5 January 2023.

37 "Guangzhou wuming Niriliya ji renshi quezhen: siren ceng duoci dao fandian yongcan" (Five Nigerians tested positive in Guangzhou: four of them dined in a restaurant several times). *Guangzhou Daily*, 7 April 2020, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MTQzMTE0MjcyMQ==&mid=2666646163&idx=6&sn=499c2815127de0e78120863e7d412b4a&chksm=66771cbd510095ab9611bc61320029c55695827996090cf0543228ef04c2de4f0bace736a726&scene=0&xtrack=1. Accessed 20 February 2023.

38 "Three Americans get heat for cutting in a Covid-19 testing line in Qingdao; local government apologizes on their behalf." *The China Project*, 1 April 2020, https://supchina.com/2020/04/01/three-americans-get-heat-for-cutting-in-a-covid-19-testing-line-in-qingdao-local-government-apologizes-on-their-behalf/. Accessed 20 February 2023.

39 Quotes concerning the Shandong incident were all collected from *Weibo* in early April 2020.

Following this episode, netizens on *Weibo* frequently returned to the historical narrative of humiliation. The phrase, "Chinese get out," referenced the infamous "Chinese and dogs not admitted" sign, which was said to have been placed in front of the Bund Park in the International Settlement in Shanghai in the late 19th century.[40] That the person who argued with the Chinese was black exacerbated matters. One comment read: "100 years ago, China was weak, but at least we were not bullied by black people. But now this happened in 2020! A black hero, puffed up like the foreigners 100 years ago, with the support of Chinese officials who said, 'give some face,' accomplished the great achievement of asking the Chinese to get out on Chinese soil."

This resort to the humiliation narrative appears paradoxical because the "humiliation" is supposedly suffered at the hands of "the West." Black people and other colonized people, if one follows the official rhetoric, are supposed to be in solidarity with the Chinese in their common struggle against the imperialist West. But it seems that the sentiments of Chinese humiliation and victimhood suffered at the hands of "the West" can easily be redirected and projected onto the black community. In fact, it is worse when it concerns black people: it is considered even more unacceptable that black people, as an "inferior race," should enjoy "supra-national treatment"; that the Chinese are not only bullied and humiliated by white people, i.e. the stronger and superior race, but "even" by black people, i.e. the weaker and inferior.

This kind of contradiction and ambivalence is not new. In 1988–1989, riots against African students broke out on university campuses across China, in Nanjing, Beijing, Shanghai and Tianjin. Chinese students shouted anti-black slogans and surrounded the dormitories of African students, leading to physical conflicts and assaults at times.[41] Monson observes that one of the causes of these tensions was "the contradictions of race position and foreign status."[42] Foreign students were accorded privileges that did not extend to their Chinese classmates, but not all foreign students were perceived in the same way. While "whites were seen as contributors to China's development … Africans were viewed as uncultured supplicants."[43]

Today, African students are still a focus of Chinese anti-black discourses. Such discourses claim that the majority of foreign students in China are from Africa, that they all receive generous Chinese government scholarships but are academically incompetent, lazy and spend their time chasing Chinese girls instead of studying. Indeed, gender has been a central theme in Chinese anti-black discourses. Relationships between African male students and Chinese women were a triggering factor in the anti-African student riots in the 1980s.[44] Black males have been consistently portrayed as AIDS carriers and irresponsible womanizers.

"Chinese boys protect Chinese girls" (*Zhongguo nanhai baohu Zhongguo nühai* 中国男孩保护中国女孩) was a trendy hashtag on *Weibo* during the period of backlash against the draft regulations on the permanent residency of foreigners, which were issued by the Ministry of Justice to gather public opinion in early 2020. Posts under the hashtag stemmed from a rumour that the government planned to "import" 500,000 "Asian, African and Latin American youths" (*YaFeiLa qingnian* 亚非拉青年) under the guise of being "overseas students" and would "encourage female university students to intermarry overseas students."[45] Netizens claimed that they would protect Chinese girls from "being intermarried"; that girls could just "have a sound sleep. Our country

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40 The story of this sign is entrenched in Chinese historical narrative and collective memory as the epitome of Western imperiousness and Chinese humiliation. That the sign most likely never existed matters little to the continual reproduction of the myth. For further discussion, see Bickers and Wasserstrom 1995; Wu 2012.

41 Sullivan 1994.

42 Monson 2013, 9.

43 Sautman 1994, 424.

44 Ibid.

45 "'Zhiyou Zhongguo nanhai caineng shouhu Zhongguo nühai': yige rangren xiao bu qilai de xiaohua" ("Only Chinese boys can protect Chinese girls": a joke hard to laugh at). *Zhihu*, 28 July 2020, https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/164765448. Accessed 20 February 2023.

and boys will deal with the rest," "even if I marry dozens or hundreds, I wouldn't let those black stuff touch our Chinese girls."

Note that in these examples, it is black Africans or *YaFeiLa* people who are being targeted. Although the same sentiments against whites exist, they are not as prevalent and vociferous as today's online anti-black discourses. This has to do with the negative image of black male sexuality but is also in line with the intertwinement between Western/white superiority and anti-black attitudes. Similar to the comments on the queue-jumping incident in Shandong, relationships between black men and Chinese women are seen as even more unacceptable than those between white men and Chinese women, precisely because whites are still (at times subconsciously) considered superior, while black people are seen as inferior.

On the other hand, Lan notes a conflation of "foreigner" and "black" identity among Chinese, especially among migrant workers from rural China whose only interactions with foreigners are with black African traders who might fit with the general Chinese perception that foreigners are rich.[46] Thus, the relationship between the "foreigner" and the "black" categories is a complicated one. It might involve different dynamics at different times, across different locales and among different social groups. Be it "contradiction" between the two, as analysed by Monson, or "conflation," as noted by Lan, what is consistent is that there is a certain sense of privilege or superiority attached to the "foreigner" category, even though "black" might fall in and out of the "foreigner" tag, depending on the context.

The sense of superiority attached to the "foreigner" category is not without contradictions and ambivalence. As the earlier discourse on a "racial war" between the yellow and the white races demonstrates, while it was perceived that whites were superior, there was also a belief that the yellow race had the capacity to catch up with them. Thus, the internalization of Western/white superiority was coupled with a resistance to it, which has become increasingly visible in the current era of China's rise. But we would be missing a key to understanding Chinese racial attitudes if we ignored the former. The strong emotions of anger and bitterness in the discourse of "supra-national treatment" can only be understood when viewed from this perspective, as it is still rooted in a sense of humiliation and in China and the Chinese being considered as inferior.

From "There Is No Small Matter in Foreign Affairs" to "Wolf Warrior Diplomacy"

Such ambivalence is also reflected in Chinese diplomatic practices. African states issued an official protest following the Guangzhou incident. African ambassadors in China addressed a letter to the Chinese foreign minister strongly protesting "the ongoing forceful testing and quarantine and maltreatment of African Nationals" and alleging that "the singling out of Africans … amounts to racism towards Africans in China."[47] The foreign ministers of Uganda, Kenya, Ghana and Nigeria summoned Chinese ambassadors regarding the situation. The African Union Commission also expressed its "extreme concern at allegations of maltreatment of Africans in Guangzhou."[48]

On the Chinese side, Ministry of Foreign Affairs' spokesperson Zhao Lijian 赵立坚 did not deny the existence of discrimination altogether, but rather considered it to be "occasional incidents and misunderstanding" in the course of combatting the pandemic. He stressed "that we treat all foreign nationals equally in China. We reject differential treatment, and we have zero tolerance for discrimination." As for solutions, Zhao suggested, "[w]e urge relevant authorities to improve working methods and hope all foreigners in China will strictly observe local anti-epidemic regulations

46 Lan 2016.
47 "Protest letter of African ambassadors in Beijing." *Front Page Africa*, 10 April 2020, https://frontpageafricaonline.com/opinion/letters-comments/protest-letter-of-african-ambassadors-in-beijing/. Accessed 20 February 2023.
48 "African nations issue protests over racism in China's Guangzhou in COVID-19 fight." *Radio Free Asia,* 13 April 2020, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/african-racism-04132020094617.html. Accessed 20 February 2023.

and cooperate with and support us in fighting the virus."[49] Although Zhao's response attempted to minimize the racist issues raised, the incident was treated as far more than just a local matter related to anti-pandemic "working methods": it was seen as a national public relations and diplomatic emergency. It was a delicate situation for the Chinese authorities, who had to respond to international pressure while at the same time appease an angry domestic audience. Gai, a social worker whose organization had a contract of service procurement with the local government, experienced these dilemmas at first hand.[50]

Gai is the director of H Centre, a private social work organization that has been working with Africans in Guangzhou since 2012; Gai started working at H Centre in 2014. In 2017, the district government purchased the organization's services through the government procurement procedure. Under this arrangement, H Centre continues its previous work, but with government funding and under direct governmental surveillance and instructions. In the wake of the Guangzhou incident, Gai, his staff and volunteers worked around the clock to provide help to foreigners under quarantine, either at home or in hotels, including grocery shopping, phone calls to checkup on their health and other services as needed.[51]

I first met Gai during my first field trip to Guangzhou in January 2020. After the heat of the Guangzhou incident had died down, I had a two-hour telephone interview with him in August 2020. In our first encounter, Gai spoke a lot about racism and discrimination against Africans, but in August, quite similar to the official response, he insisted that the incident was borne out of the chaos of the anti-Covid campaign, misunderstanding and a lack of experience on the part of the local authorities. The government, Gai told me, did not act so badly this time. Rather, it had spent a lot of money and some of the policies and treatment accorded to Africans could indeed be called "supra-national treatment." According to Gai, the government offered such preferential treatment primarily out of concern for its diplomatic relations and international reputation:

> They [the Africans] know that the Chinese government is most afraid of this kind of thing, so they do this all the time. At every turn, they say they would call the embassy, would complain, etc. for very small problems … There are many policies that the government will not announce publicly, because Chinese people say at every turn "supra-national treatment," etc. But these policies for foreigners during the pandemic, for African friends … honestly, some of these policies and treatment, in my personal opinion, were indeed a bit supra-national … why supra-national treatment? Because they say at every turn, if you do this, I will call, I will complain to my embassy, so the government had no choice but to satisfy their demands.[52]

According to Gai, international reputation is of such high importance to the Chinese government that it could be blackmailed with the threat of complaints. This attitude is reflected in a well-known phrase in China: "there is no small matter in foreign affairs" (*waijiao wu xiaoshi* 外交无小事). It is believed to be an instruction by Zhou Enlai 周恩来, the first premier and minister of foreign affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC), to diplomats, but its usage in China is far broader than diplomacy. In this connection, there is another Chinese word, the English translation of which hardly carries its full connotations: *shewai* 涉外, literally meaning foreign-related. In the Chinese context, when something is considered *shewai*, it immediately obtains a sense of importance and sensitivity, precisely because "there is no small matter in foreign affairs."

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49 "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's regular press conference on April 9, 2020," http://us.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/fyrth/202004/t20200409_4474719.htm. Accessed 20 February 2023.
50 Gai is a pseudonym, as is the name of the organization he works for.
51 The official mandate of H Centre is to provide services to all foreigners in Y District in Guangzhou, the majority of which are from Africa. According to Gai and volunteers of a self-organized volunteer group, most of the foreigners with whom they had contact during the Guangzhou incident were Africans.
52 Online interview with Gai, 10 August 2020.

"Foreign affairs" is used to cover anything "foreign-related," even when it concerns the mundane daily activities of an ordinary foreign citizen in China.

This approach has a unique historical context. During the first decades after the establishment of the PRC, as the country was closed to the outside world, overseas visitors were largely limited to diplomats, students or other invited guests. As such, they were afforded certain privileges. Following the same logic, "there is no small matter in foreign affairs" was expanded to cover any "foreign-related" matters. Today, many foreigners of all kinds visit or reside in China, but this attitude and related practices are slow to change, which has led to some discontent, and not only from nationalist netizens. For example, according to Song Jie 宋杰, professor of international law at Zhejiang Gongshang University 浙江工商大学, the practice of affording foreigners privileges stems from when "[China] was totally defeated by the West and the confidence [of the Chinese] was completely destroyed." He has called for "putting our own nationals at the core of the concerns and the protection of the country," so that "diplomacy will win the minds and hearts of the people."[53] When Gai and his team shopped for groceries or emptied the rubbish for foreigners under quarantine, they were met with Chinese residents who were resentful of the privileges offered to foreigners: "they say, we were under quarantine, too. No one did any grocery shopping for us … if you take their trash, why don't you take mine as well? I'll just put it in front of the door."[54]

Thus, when Zhao Lijian was responding to international criticism about "Chinese racism," he was also addressing a domestic audience alert to any trace of "kneeling and licking," which might provoke a backlash at home. There has been much debate in the literature over whether, how and to what extent nationalist sentiment influences China's foreign policy, questions which still remain unanswered.[55] There is, however, little doubt that China's diplomatic stance in recent years, while considered to be more and more aggressive by the outside world, has been garnering huge support at home.

Evidence of the public support for such "wolf-warrior diplomacy" can be seen in the reactions to a speech given by Yang Jiechi 杨洁篪, then director of the Central Foreign Affairs Commission of the CPC, at the China–US Summit in March 2021. In the speech, Yang told the US that it should stop speaking down to China "in a condescending way from a position of strength." He asked rhetorically, "have the Chinese people not suffered enough in the past from the foreign countries?" Yang took pride in China's victories against foreign aggressors and its economic achievements: "the United States does not have the qualification to say that it wants to speak to China from a position of strength. The US side was not qualified to say such things even 20 years or 30 years back … there is no way to strangle China. Our history will show that one can only cause damage to oneself if one wants to strangle or suppress the Chinese people."[56]

The speech was warmly received in China. The idiom *yangmei tuqi* 扬眉吐气 was used frequently in posts commenting on the speech on popular and social media alike. Roughly translated as holding one's head up high in a proud manner, it is often used in a context where one regains one's dignity after suffering humiliation. Its usage in the reactions to the speech perfectly depicts the general sentiment: that after a long history of bowing down to foreigners, China finally has the strength to hold its head up high.

Both Yang's speech and the public's reaction to it reveal a competitive, social Darwinist approach to international affairs, which echoes the late 19th century idea of "racial war" and which has been reinforced with every reiteration of the "century of humiliation" narrative. Yi Wang points out that in Chinese political and public discourse, one important "lesson learned" from the "century of

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53 Song 2014.
54 Online interview with Gai, 10 August 2020.
55 See, e.g., Weiss 2014; Jie 2016.
56 A Chinese version of the speech is available at https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_11811217. An English version is available at https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/US-China-tensions/How-it-happened-Transcript-of-the-US-China-opening-remarks-in-Alaska. Both accessed 20 February 2023.

humiliation" is that "the backward will be beaten."[57] This dictum ascribes China's historical humili-ation to its economic, military and technological backwardness, and asserts that only by developing and becoming stronger can a country guarantee its security in a ruthlessly competitive world. It has been repeatedly invoked in Chinese political and public discourses to interpret contemporary world events, such as the US bombing of the Chinese embassy in Kosovo and the missile strikes against Syria in 2018.[58]

The corollary of this logic is that a country must be strong and assertive or else be "beaten." According to Yang's speech, the US should be more respectful to China not because both are equal as independent countries, but because the US "does not have the qualification" to tell China what to do. The US already lost that qualification "even 20 years or 30 years back," because China had already become stronger by that time. Hidden behind the assertiveness of the "wolf-warrior diplomacy" is a harsh self-judgement based on material strength. It is thus unsurprising that the same logic and judge-ment are applied to other nations and peoples, including African countries and their populations. The standard behind that judgement is development as an indicator of Western modernity.

Race, *Suzhi* 素质 and Western Modernity

In her study on the media's portrayal of HIV/AIDS in China, Johanna Hood analyses how the virus came to be presented as a racialized and nonlocal disease, with black Africans being portrayed as being particularly prone to infection owing to their perceived sexual behaviour, primitivity, poverty and sociocultural backwardness.[59] Similarly, when the Covid-19 virus began to spread around the world and China appeared to have contained it with draconian measures, the disease also came to be presented as a nonlocal one, as indicated by the term "imported cases" (*jingwai shuru bingli* 境外输入病例). The Guangzhou incident demonstrates how Covid-19 was racialized, with black Africans once again associated with the spread of a disease because of their perceived sociocultural characteristics: "uncivilized, unruly, unhygienic, and of low quality."[60]

When discussing the Guangzhou incident in interviews, many of my African interlocutors stated that they could accept the anti-Covid measures but not the differentiated treatment between black people and Chinese, and between black and white people. One university student from the Republic of Congo who lived on campus reported that Chinese and white students were allowed to leave the dormitory and return, but not black students. What bothered him even more was the behaviour of the Chinese people he encountered in daily life. After the situation improved and he could get out of the campus, he recounted:

> Now what hurts me, what really hurts me, is their behaviour, how the Chinese behave towards the black people. When you go to a restaurant or a small shop to get something, the Chinese chase you away, as if you are sick … as if you are an animal. They flee from you … The Chinese, they walk on the street, without a mask, but as soon as they see you, they take out their masks and wear them … When you get on a bus, as soon as the Chinese see you, they turn their back on you, they touch their nose, they start to do really weird things … The Chinese government has said that the disease does not choose people, but why do the Chinese diminish only black people?[61]

This attitude was not only borne out of fears surrounding the Covid pandemic but also reflects a long-standing prejudice against black people. As one South African student in Beijing put it,

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57 Wang 2020.
58 Ibid., 895.
59 Hood 2011.
60 Hood 2013, 305.
61 Online interview with a Congolese student, 6 August 2020.

"Africans are seen as dirty, as carrying disease."[62] This perception is associated with class and socio-economic status and, by extension, the level of sociocultural development – of "civilization" and modernity. The Chinese term *suzhi* 素质 (quality) is often used to indicate such development levels. In her analysis of how the Chinese narrative on HIV/AIDS shifted from a nonlocal issue to incorporate Han Chinese "AIDS sufferers," Hood notes that the latter were presented as having much in common with their African counterparts. According to Hood, it was low *suzhi*, "associated most often with Chinese rural laborers, migrants, urban unwanted, and ethnic minorities," that was considered to have put people at risk of the disease.[63]

The literature on Africans in China has long noticed a link between the representations of Chinese rural migrants and black Africans. A 1992 survey conducted among a diverse population including students and intellectuals revealed that respondents held very similar attitudes towards Africans and peasants. Both groups received low scores and ranked bottom in culture, intelligence and the capacity to manage their own affairs.[64] Almost three decades later, based on his fieldwork in Dengfeng 登峰 village in Guangzhou, an urban village known as "the African village" as it was home to many African traders, Guangzhi Huang observed that African communities were still associated with rurality.[65]

Urban villages are often home to the Others in cities – not just Africans but also Chinese rural migrants. Two years after the Guangzhou incident and just a couple of months before China's sudden relaxation of the anti-Covid measures, similar processes of "othering" were taking place against rural migrants residing in urban villages, providing a vivid illustration of the link between rural migrants and black Africans.

In October 2022, there was a surge in Covid-19 cases in two urban villages in Guangzhou, Kangle 康乐 and Lujiang 鹭江, both located in Haizhu 海珠 district, a major textile manufacturing hub. While official data were unavailable, media reports claimed that the two villages, which cover an area of just over one square kilometre, were home to more than 100,000 residents, the vast majority of whom were migrant workers, mostly from Hubei province.[66] Just as Dengfeng village was dubbed the "African village," the area of Kangle and Lujiang was known as "Hubei village." In November 2022, the Guangzhou Centre for Disease Control declared that as positive cases in the area continued to soar and considering the dense population and narrow distances between buildings, the best way to contain the spread of the virus was to transfer residents to other locations for quarantine.[67] On 17 November 2022, Haizhu district reported that 95,300 people had already been moved out of the area.[68]

The organization in charge of operating and managing the assets of the two villages, the Fengyang 凤阳 Subdistrict Fenghe 凤和 Economic Union, took further steps.[69] On 13 November 2022, the Fenghe Economic Union announced a one-month "comprehensive management" (*zonghe*

62 Online interview with a South African student, 17 July 2020.
63 Hood 2011, 6.
64 Sautman 1994, 429–432.
65 Huang 2020. "Urban villages" are so named because they are located in cities but administered as villages. One key distinction is that rural and suburban lands belong to rural collectives, while urban lands belong to the state. Rural lands are administered by various rural collective economic organizations. To understand more about urban villages and their different ways of governance across China, see Tang 2015.
66 "Woshou louli, bei fengkong de 26 tian" (26 days of confinement in handshake buildings). *The Paper*, 18 November 2022, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/g3sooVnI-N0qyH6wUOg2Cw. Accessed 11 January 2023. The term "handshake buildings" refers to multi-storey buildings in urban villages that are extremely close to each other, often constructed by the villagers and not in compliance with formal regulations and standards on urban buildings.
67 "Kanjian Kanglu, kanjian yiqing xia de putongren" (Seeing Kang-Lu, seeing the ordinary people during the pandemic). *Tying Knots*, 22 November 2022, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/0k7fHdpHCNB3PeXQjoGmdg. Accessed 11 January 2023.
68 "Guangzhou yiqing 'zhenzhong' Haizhuqu: yi zhuanyun 9.53 wan ren, shequ chuanbo fengxian wei zuduan" (Haizhu district, the "epicentre" of Guangzhou's pandemic: 95,300 people already transferred, risks of community transmission not yet blocked). *Yicai*, 17 November 2022, https://m.yicai.com/news/101598022.html. Accessed 11 January 2023.
69 Economic union (*jingji lianheshe*) is a form of rural collective economic organization. According to Art. 6 of the Provisions of Guangdong Province for the Administration on Rural Collective Economic Organizations, these organizations are in charge of operating and managing the assets of the towns or villages concerned.

zhili 综合治理) project for the two villages. Village residents were told to either go back to their hometowns or stay with family or friends in other parts of the city.[70] Thus, those who had been transferred for quarantine suddenly found themselves with nowhere to go after quarantine. Returning to their hometowns was not the simple solution it appeared to be. Some migrants wanted to remain in Guangzhou for work, some could not afford to pay for the trip plus the quarantine costs upon arrival, and those who were ready to return first needed to retrieve their belongings from Kangle and Lujiang. Many tried to negotiate with those standing guard at the entrance to the area, which was fenced off, but to no avail; they ended up sleeping on the street.[71]

The Fenghe Economic Union justified its decision by claiming that the villages were plagued by multiple problems that made containment of the virus difficult, including "backward infrastructure" and a dense population that produced too much garbage, resulting in a "dirty, disorderly and poor" environment. Such an image of urban villages is widespread and accepted in the public discourse, with informality seen as the cause: houses are built and extended without permission, small businesses and household workshops operate without any proper registration or licensing. Huang observed that this informality was considered a result of "Africans' and rural migrants' lawlessness and lack of self-discipline" – the underlying structural problems were completely ignored.[72] Through these narratives, the problems of the city such as "backwardness," "disorder," bad hygiene or disease all become problems caused by the "Other." The solution appears to be simple: send the Africans back to Africa and the rural migrants back to their hometowns.

The similarities in the attitudes towards and treatment of rural migrants and black Africans do not mean that race is irrelevant. It has been argued that the use of *suzhi* as a behaviour-centred criterion by which to evaluate outer groups means that, in the Chinese context, "personal virtues and socially appropriate behaviors can sometimes outweigh skin color in the construction of group identity."[73] This argument recognizes the complexity, flexibility and fluidity of Chinese racial perceptions. However, *suzhi* could also be used inversely: it could serve as an instrument of rationalizing and justifying racial thinking, making racial hierarchy static precisely by essentializing Africans as "low quality." As noted by Andrew Kipnis, the term *suzhi* involves both nature and nurture.[74]

One overlooked aspect of *suzhi* is that it is used as an indicator to evaluate not only others but also oneself. Linking Africa to "backwardness" means assuredly seeing China as developed and modern. Roberto Castillo analyses how narratives in Chinese TV shows portray Africa as being linked to nature and tradition, while China is associated with modernity and technology; China's role is therefore portrayed as to provide "a way for Africa to enter modernity."[75] However, it is important to remember that China's pride in its modernity and technology is inseparable from its fear and shame of its historical "backwardness" in comparison to the West and the "humiliation" it suffered, which are perceived as an inevitable result of being weak. Thus, this version of modernity not only essentializes different groups but also determines their positions within the racial hierarchy according to their level of socioeconomic development.

It is beyond the scope of this article to review how development came to be seen as modernity and how African underdevelopment its converse.[76] Suffice it to note that the Western modernist discourse that categorizes the world into modern versus pre-modern, civilized versus barbarian, developed versus underdeveloped, was the justification for the colonial exploitation of Africa as well as the Western encroachments of Chinese territory in the late Qing dynasty. As noted

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70 *Tying Knots*, 22 November 2022.
71 Xiang 2022.
72 Huang 2020, 155.
73 Lan 2016, 309.
74 Kipnis 2006, 308.
75 Castillo 2020, 324–25.
76 For a more detailed treatment of the subject, see Lushaba 2009.

above, the Chinese accepted this underlying logic of world order and civilizational hierarchy. Ever since the late Qing dynasty, "great rejuvenation" has remained the biggest "Chinese dream." When positioning Africa and Africans within this hierarchy, the Chinese are also positioning themselves in relation to these outgroups, and the West/whites remain the point of reference. The aim might be to replace the West/whites to occupy the top position, but the standard is still the one already set by the West.

Thus, as Huang notes, when reporting on how the gentrification of Dengfeng village transformed it from a "disorderly," "dirty and chaotic" area to a place suitable for living and working, local media used "whiteness to symbolize progress and improvement in property value" by claiming that increasing numbers of Europeans and Americans had visited the area after the clean-up.[77] This understanding of modernity also explains the hierarchy of nationality observed by many scholars of Africans in China. Local people in Guangzhou distinguish between *meihei* 美黑 (black Americans) and *feihei* 非黑 (black Africans) and treat them differently. The common perception is that *meihei* are more educated, wealthier, more polite and thus more respectable. Several American and British interlocutors confirmed that they received better treatment than did their black peers from non-Western countries.[78] A former Ghanaian PhD student in a leading university in China recounted in an online seminar that one professor at this university questioned his academic ability because he was educated in Ghana, while another African student, who had studied in the US, was presumed to have sufficient academic ability.[79]

Lan, however, notes that compared to Guangzhou's local residents, migrants from rural China might place Africans in a higher position owing to their English proficiency or/and higher economic status.[80] Also, as Africans are often the first and only foreigners they see, there could be a merging of the "African" and "foreign" categories, with Africans consequently also being perceived as superior. One Zimbabwean businessman who travels between Guangzhou and Loudi 娄底, a small city in the inland province of Hunan, stated that he felt a big difference between the two cities:

> People in Hunan, oh my god, they like African people. When they see you, they are very happy. They take pictures. They don't speak English. I don't speak Chinese as well, which I feel so bad [about]. I wish I could speak Chinese, or I wish they could speak English. It would please me if I could communicate with them because they are really friendly. I spent very good time [there], especially in social terms.[81]

I heard similar accounts from several African interlocuters. One Nigerian student in Wuhan told me, "I prefer people from the countryside than people who are well educated."[82]

Whatever the perceptions might be of Africans, *suzhi* plays a crucial role in determining acceptance or social status in Chinese society. What the concept truly indicates is a hierarchical world view based on the seemingly "objective" standards of economic and sociocultural development. Just as with the "backward-beaten" logic, the concept is used to judge Africans as well as Chinese. Perceived differences in *suzhi* are used as a demarcation line between the Self and the Other, be it for rural migrants or black Africans. As the standard of comparison derives from an acceptance of Western modernity, the West/whites are traditionally considered to be of high quality; the Chinese are lower quality but are catching up quickly thanks to the intelligence and industriousness of the Chinese people, which are essentialized as inherent cultural or racial traits; black Africans

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77 Huang 2020, 162–63.
78 Online interview with an African American interlocutor living in Guangzhou, 22 July 2020; interviews and informal conversations with several black British interlocutors, November 2021, Beijing.
79 Online seminar, 6 February 2021.
80 Lan 2016, 308–09.
81 Online interview with Zimbabwean businessman, 1 August 2020.
82 Interview with Nigerian student, Wuhan, 23 November 2021.

occupy the bottom of the hierarchy, with the economic underdevelopment of the continent, in contrast to China's rapid growth, serving as "objective evidence" of the "low quality" of Africans.

Conclusion

The contemporary Chinese ethno-racial identity and Chinese racial attitudes towards Africans are shaped by China's interactions with and perceptions of the West since the 19th century. In pre-modern China, the self–other relation in the Sino-centric world view took the shape of a circle, with the Chinese sitting in the middle, and the reference group(s) were the various "barbarians" who lived on the peripheries of the Chinese Empire. This circular structure was destroyed in the late 19th century and a new reference group, which was then little known or overlooked by the Chinese, took centre stage: the West. Forced to accept the material superiority of a stronger West while holding on to the pride of the old "Middle Kingdom," the Chinese re-appropriated Western concepts of race and racial hierarchy to reconstruct a new world view. In accordance with this new world view, the Chinese reconstructed their identity in relation to two different Others: the Western/white and the non-Western/non-white. If the former was the model and the enemy at the same time, the latter served as contrasting groups whose tragic fate was a reminder of the importance of material strength, and whose essentialized backwardness was juxtaposed against the potential of the yellow race to compete with the white on an equal basis.

This article argues that this is still the dominant world view that underpins contemporary Chinese racial nationalism, as reflected in popular discourses like the "supra-national treatment," as well as in Chinese diplomatic rhetoric and practices. This social Darwinist world view, which stresses ruthless competition and regards economic development and material strength as the sole standard of winning, is deeply influenced by China's early modern history and the manner in which it has been narrated and remembered. Thus, there is a harsh judgement of not only the Others but also the Self according to this standard, which helps to explain many of the contradictions and the ambivalence in Chinese racial attitudes. Unlike white supremacy in Western racial thinking, Chinese racism against non-white peoples is often coupled with an inferiority complex. This article does not suggest that all Chinese hold the same psychological pattern, but it does provide a way of understanding the particularities of Chinese racial thinking, and the influence of global white supremacy within the Chinese context.

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