

Intervention Symposium – “Black Humanity: Bearing Witness to COVID-19”

Organized by Elaine Coburn and Wesley Crichlow

**COVID-19, Anti-Black Racism in China, and Political Economy of
Asymmetrical Power**

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Abstract

This commentary examines how the history of anti-Black racism in China combines with the preponderance of a pariah narrative on social and traditional media to link the virus’ resurgence in the city with Africans/Blacks, resulting in wholesale stigmatization, ostracization, and blatant anti-Black racism by Chinese officials and ordinary citizens. It also analyzes how the asymmetrical political economy of Sino-African relations constrains the ability of African countries to compel Beijing to take any substantive proactive measures to educate its population to unlearn deeply entrenched racist attitudes towards Africa(ns).

Keywords

African diaspora, anti-Black racism, COVID-19, political economy

Global health crises have a tendency to create “the other” as “folk devils” (Cohen 1972) who are vilified and held responsible for threats to public health and safety (McCauley et al. 2013). As the world contends with COVID-19, a concomitant development has surfaced revealing the overt and subtle acts of racism and discrimination mainly against people of Asian, particularly Chinese, origin. China has been vociferous in condemning these acts and in pushing against association of the virus with Wuhan, where it is generally believed to have originated, or with China in general. It is, therefore, ironic to see similar acts of antipathy towards Africans/Blacks in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou during the second wave of the pandemic in April 2020 (Zhu 2020). The city is home to the largest community of the African diaspora in the country. Some estimates put their number at over 200,000 (BBC News 2020) although official statistics are significantly lower because many are undocumented. Guangzhou “has become a Promised Land for many African migrants seeking wealth and fortune in the global economy” (Lan 2016: 298).

This commentary examines how the history of anti-Black racism in China combines with the preponderance of a pariah narrative on social and traditional media to link the virus’ resurgence in the city with Africans/Blacks, resulting in wholesale stigmatization, ostracization, and blatant anti-Black racism by Chinese officials and ordinary citizens. It also analyzes how the asymmetrical political economy of Sino-African relations constrains the ability of African countries to compel Beijing to take any substantive proactive measures to educate its population to unlearn deeply entrenched racist attitudes towards Africa(ns).

History of Anti-Black Racism in China, COVID-19, and the African Diaspora

Dikötter (1994) and Sullivan (1994) contend that racism has been a feature of Chinese society for eons. They trace anti-Black racism to the 12th century, through the racial nationalism of reformist intellectuals in the 19th century, to its contemporary manifestations. The historical specificities of its expression have varied over time and resulted in several violent conflicts between citizens and Africans (Cheng 2011; Sautman 1994). Sun (2020) notes that “in Chinese society, implicit racism and discrimination against Africans, or more broadly, ‘black people’ is

not new and had been observed long before the COVID-19 crisis”. *Heiren* (Blacks) from *feizhou* (the “evil/poor/wrong continent”) have been explicitly excluded from applying for positions, targeted by police, and openly denigrated in popular culture.

This underbelly of anti-Black racism came into bold relief in Guangzhou in early April 2020. Reports that a COVID-19-positive Nigerian had attacked a nurse as he tried to escape from an isolation ward, elicited visceral online backlash against Africans. City authorities then embarked on a broad-brush public health intervention that targeted the Black African community, compelling all members to undergo testing for the virus and to self-isolate or go into forced quarantine, without a demonstrable, scientifically-based rationale. There is overwhelming evidence to debunk official denials of discrimination. Authorities

... visited homes of African residents, testing them on the spot or instructing them to take a test at a hospital. Some were ordered to self-isolate at home with surveillance cameras or alarms installed outside of their apartments. (Human Rights Watch 2020)

This high-handed approach was employed despite the fact that many Africans had neither traveled outside the city in recent weeks nor been connected to a positive case. In fact, the majority of those who tested positive were returning Chinese nationals (Reuters 2020a), who did not have to undergo this disproportionate exhibition of governmentality by city authorities. These actions ignited a moral panic that turned African/Black bodies into objects of a racist synopticon. Chinese citizens imbibed the narrative of the diseased African and a contagion mindset on the basis of which they engaged in acts of surveillance, vilification, and ostracism to root out the “folk devils”. Africans/Blacks were denied or given limited access to restaurants, shopping malls, transit, etc. (The Guardian 2020). A number of them were evicted from their homes or denied access to their apartments even when they had proof of a negative diagnosis.

The evidence points to the fact that skin color was the primary, if not sole, basis for labeling and stigmatization. McDonald’s was forced to apologize for a sign at one of its outlets that said: “We have been informed that from now on black people are not allowed to enter the

restaurant” (Sternlicht 2020). There were also instances where Blacks and non-Blacks who arrived contemporaneously at establishments were treated differently, with only the Africans/Blacks being denied access for no justifiable reason. Indeed, Blacks from Canada and the USA were not spared these manifestly racist experiences, compelling the US Consulate General Guangzhou (2020) to warn “African-Americans or those who believe Chinese officials may suspect them of having contact with nationals of African countries to avoid the Guangzhou metropolitan area until further notice”.

While many Africans/Blacks resisted the indignities to which they were subjected, through active non-compliance with arbitrary requirements or surreptitiously exiting the gaze of the state, they were limited in how far they could push for social justice. Therefore, they resorted to the amplifying power of social media to articulate their experiences – an empowering form of witnessing to give voice to their plight and to engender action on the part of their home and host governments. The images from Guangzhou, showing Black Africans thrown out of their homes, sleeping on the street, and being denied access to facilities, were carried by major global news outlets and sparked outrage on the African continent and among compatriots elsewhere. African governments were compelled by the mounting pressure to confront the Chinese government with the evidence and to demand that their citizens be fairly treated.

Challenges of Asymmetrical Power and Need for Substantive Change

The protests from African governments were uncharacteristic in their concertedness, but the tone and approach reflected a careful navigation of the asymmetrical political economy of Sino-African relations (Reuters 2020b; South China Morning Post 2020). The continent is vulnerably dependent on China for trade, infrastructure development, and foreign aid, including COVID-19 emergency support estimated at US\$280 million (DW 2020). Both the Guangzhou city authorities and their compatriots in Beijing denied accusations of discrimination and racism, contending that the country has “zero tolerance” for such acts. They engaged in discursive tactics of deflection (Lentin 2015) and “how aboutism”, excoriating the US for its criticism of their actions and asking it to address its own challenges with racism. They accused the Americans of

fomenting animosity between Africans and Chinese in order to undermine what they argue are excellent, collaborative, mutually respectful and beneficial relationships. Admittedly, the US government was engaged in self-righteous weaponization of Chinese racism for its own geopolitical interests. That does not, however, negate the fact of Chinese anti-Black racism, which may have receded for now, but gives no indication of going into oblivion.

The June 2020 China-Africa Summit on Solidarity Against COVID-19 that followed the crisis sought to demonstrate “unshakable China-African friendships despite previous bumps”, “[m]utual trust and respect”, and “treat[ment of] each other as true friends” (Global Times 2020). This picture buries the reality of Chinese anti-Black racism and repeats the historical disconnect between official rhetoric and the lived realities of Africans/Blacks in China. Indeed, anti-Black racism was rife on Chinese social media (Liu and Deng 2020), and these discourses and related actions were nowhere close to abating despite the state’s claim that it had “zero tolerance over discriminatory language or acts” (ABC 2020; Pfafman et al., 2015). The fact that such visceral and vitriolic anti-Black racism continues in a society where the state has a stranglehold on expression within social media sphericules gives the appearance of malignant neglect, at best. The disconnect between official rhetoric and the lived experiences of Africans/Blacks accentuates anxiety for the victims of anti-Black racism who cannot reconcile the incongruity between execution of orders against them and denials by the same authorities who presumably gave them.

Guangzhou exposes a deeply ingrained culture of anti-Black racism in China, notwithstanding official self-adulation about respect and support for Africa(ns). The contradiction between Africans’/Blacks’ lived racist experiences and Chinese accolades of Sino-African cooperation juxtaposes the self-serving openness to the benefits of economic and humanitarian engagement with a distant, reified Africa by China and its citizens, on the one hand, and an enduring proclivity on their part towards institutional and individual anti-Black racism in more proximate local contexts. The insidiousness and fragility of a relationship sutured on “discrepancy between pro-African political ideology at the state level and anti-African

sentiments and practices at the individual and local level” (Lan 2016: 305) has been highlighted by developments in supposedly cosmopolitan Guangzhou.

Unless China stops denying the reality of anti-Black racism, it will only be a matter of time before the current relative calm, necessitated by and negotiated through a political economy of mutual convenience, flares up again under the pressure of another crisis. The state should go beyond “engineer[ing] the sentimentality of solidarity” (Duan 2019: 1367) and recognize that solidarity is vacuous when it is not based on the acceptance of the intrinsic worth of African/Black peoples as humans deserving of reciprocal respect and dignified treatment. Genuinely proactive efforts by China are needed to educate its citizens to unlearn and eschew scientifically discredited racist ideologies, and to nourish the work of compatriots who defy the odds to fight anti-Black racism.

On their part, African leaders should balance economic dependence with sustained championing of the dignity of their people, pushing China to address anti-Black racism not in episodic fashion but as an enduring condition for the economic benefit that it derives from its relationship with the continent. They should not subserviently resign themselves to the inevitability of an asymmetrical economic relationship that glosses over persistent, undignified treatment of Africans/Blacks. They should wake up from the soporific and condescending platitudes from China, and collectively push for concrete and efficacious action. Chinese citizens generally enjoy respect, acceptance, and success in Africa. It is not too much for Africa(ns) to deserve, and for China/the Chinese to deliver, dignified, non-racist treatment?

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