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Racial Discrimination in Uncertain Times: Covid-19, Positionality and Africans in China Studies

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Translated into Chinese from the original English by Xi Jin, Peking University

After Covid-19 was declared a global pandemic on March 11 2020, countries around the world have been struggling to manage the devastating economic, social and political fall-outs. Although China was the epicentre of the outbreak in the beginning, it managed to flatten the curve in a short time. After that it ventured out to assist other countries to manage the crisis, a crisis that some perceived it helped to create on a global scale.¹ Africa was a major recipient of China's rescue package, including the emergency supply of Chinese doctors, gifts of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other materials. The Chinese billionaire, Jack Ma, also made large donations to African countries. However, as China busied itself with coordinating Covid-19 preparedness and response with the African Union and individual African countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020; Mission of the People's Republic of China to the African Union 2020), different publics were discussing how the Chinese state is treating and failing to protect Africans within its borders.

Starting in early April 2020 a series of video clips surfaced online, showing Africans on the streets complaining angrily about being racially discriminated against in China. In some clips, Africans accused the Chinese government and the media of pushing the narrative that Africans were spreading Covid-19. Some images showed Africans in homeless-like conditions in Guangzhou city, a vibrant commercial hub which has, in the last two decades, received the greatest number of African migrants in all of China (Bodomo 2016). There were also reports of forced and abusive evictions, banning of black people from restaurants and malls, and compulsory and, at times, multiple quarantining of African residents, regardless of their travel history (Albert 2020; Asiedu 2020; Olander 2020). We also saw a Nigerian diplomat in other videos engaging in street-level diplomacy: he argued with Chinese security officers and health workers in a quarantine hotel and distributed food to Nigerians in the rain. The videos were concerning because they seem to be confirming how much has not changed within China towards accepting Africans who are living in and changing the racial composition of the country (Adebayo and Omololu 2020; Joseph, Sun, and Teya 2017).

Unfortunately, as much as Chinese diplomats in Africa wished – or insisted – that the racist treatment of Africans in the middle of a pandemic was ‘an isolated case’, history

proves otherwise. Africans have for some time lived on the margins of Chinese society with racist treatment being a common occurrence in interracial interactions (Bodomo 2020). There is a well-documented body of evidence on the perception and othering of Africans as disease spreaders who are bent on polluting the Chinese race (Cheng 2011; Dikötter 1990; Liang and Le Billon 2018; Pfafman, Carpenter, and Tang 2015; Sullivan 1994). When confronted with a severe public health crisis, Africa/Africans feature in China's imagination as disease carriers (Hood 2013). An example was the HIV/AIDS crisis in which the media and public health promotions distanced the Chinese from, and opposed its healthiness to, the *heiren's* diseases and un-healthiness (Hood 2013). Relatedly, the treatment of Africans during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014 points to a similar response in which racism and discrimination tended to mark how African visitors and residents were treated in Chinese cities (see Lin et al. 2015 published commentary). At the height of the Ebola outbreak, a Nigerian woman told me how a Chinese doctor met her and her sick daughter with disgust when she visited the hospital.²

What the Covid-19 outbreak and the subsequent events from April 2020 reveal is that China does not appear to have made a significant shift away from the othering and scapegoating of black bodies in the management of disease outbreak. It appears that the default position is to distance Africans during a public health crisis in China, even if their connection to such outbreaks is limited and remote.

Clearly, the racial discrimination against Africans in the implementation of a Covid-19 containment strategy in China, which led to what Yu Qiu in this roundtable called the 'Guangzhou Moment', is critical in rethinking the role that scholarly engagements with race, racism and xenophobia can play in the search for a solid foundation for Africa-China friendship. As a Nigerian researcher based in an African university, however, how do I research and critique African experiences of racial discrimination while paying attention to the influences of my positionality? This question is at the centre of my reflection in this contribution. In what follows, I reflect on my disposition to the field of "Africans in China Studies", as well as my affinities with the researched, to highlight the epistemic burden that arises from producing knowledge on racial discrimination against Africans in contemporary China. Specifically, I describe how making my positionality explicit creates room to raise more critical questions about the foundation of Africa-China friendship.

My Disposition and "Africans in China Studies"

I ventured into "Africans in China Studies" in the same spirit that many African scholars entered the field of African Studies. African researchers are critical of the canons in African Studies and framed as one of their tasks the need to confront Eurocentric domination through their intellectual activism and struggles (Arowosegbe 2014). There is no denying that framing their task this way was a political choice, in which there is an expectation of challenging the structures of asymmetries, inequalities and hierarchies in the production of knowledge about Africa/Africans (Arowosegbe 2014; Krenceyova 2014; Schöneberg 2019). Similarly, for me, I set up my task in the field of "Africans in China Studies" as one in which the subaltern can speak (Spivak 1988). I wanted to see the field evolve in a way that neither Sino- nor Western-centric outlooks would become canons that drown out African perspectives on African experiences.

My journey toward prioritising and infusing an African perspective into the field of “Africans in China Studies” started with my doctoral research. The research, whose fieldwork happened over the course of two visits to China in 2017, focused on the migration and settlement experiences of Nigerians in Guangzhou city. While there, I interviewed 52 Nigerians and 17 Chinese³ to find out how the Nigerian community had evolved, and the ways that the context of race, “illegality” and intra-diaspora social relations have shaped the settlement process of Nigerians. Although I faced (im)mobility barriers while planning to travel to China from Nigeria, from funding issues and visa challenge to a peculiarly intrusive body search and questioning at the Baiyun International Airport (see Adebayo 2018), I felt it was important to “be/go there” to observe and hear directly from Nigerians in Guangzhou. “Being there” allowed me to get to know some of my interlocutors at a personal level. I have maintained close contact with a few of them since 2017.

So, when the news broke that Africans in Guangzhou were being racially discriminated against as part of Covid-19 measures, I contacted Nigerians whom I know personally as a way to understand what was happening on the ground in that city. I was mostly interested in what Nigerians in China were saying and the stories that they collect and disseminate. My main source of information was two Nigerian individuals. Besides the videos they shared with me, most of which were available to millions online, they also shared confidential voice notes and gave feedback about their personal experiences.

For instance, in April, one of them received a phone call from his apartment manager in Foshan at 10 pm. The manager called to inform him that all foreigners were mandated to proceed to compulsory quarantine at designated quarantine hotels (QHs). His Chinese wife told him to wait until the next day, but he insisted he would go that same night, despite not being prepared for it – he could not pack his daily need items, including toothbrush and hair clipper. “I don’t want any problem in China”, he told me. He feared that if he could not prove that he went to the QH, renewing his visa in the future could be difficult – if not impossible. Although he was not forced or harassed, he felt stressed and lonely because of the abrupt separation from his wife and their three biracial children.

The second informant was more interested in how I could help him get *their* stories of racial discrimination in China out. Although he was not affected personally, he confirmed that hotels and restaurants turned Africans away. Moreover, he told me about the #China-MustExplain hashtag they were promoting on social media platforms and invited me to join in trending it. I had planned to delay “joining the trend”, but the informant’s request quickened my intervention. The request accelerated my posting of videos, tweets and retweets in which I joined countless other voices to call on African states and on China to act. With the Covid-19 pandemic and a heightened environment of racial discrimination in China, I watched as my research agenda quickly blended with the agenda of my informants.

However, I was concerned about my “objectivity” in researching an inherently political topic like African/black discrimination and racism in China. This concern is a dilemma that affinitive solidarity engenders in the knowledge production process. When combined with my disposition to the field of research, solidarity presents an

epistemic burden. The burden is one in which I am inclined, as an African researcher, to show that I am/can indeed be an “objective” observer of racism and racial discrimination against Africans in China – assuming that we all agree on what objectivity means and that there is no disagreement that objectivity is *the* goal of research. While this concern is legitimate, I have become increasingly convinced that acknowledging and signposting my positionality is a truthful way to navigate these challenging epistemic waters.

“Intentioned Disclosure” and Positionality

Positionality refers to the positions researchers occupy in relation to the researched, and to the broader structure of power and society that determines how they engage the field and collect and interpret data (Mwambari 2019; Qin 2016; da Silva and Webster 2018). However, the critical issue is not that such positionalities exist, but that researchers undertake an “intentioned disclose” of them and the possible ways they may affect the research processes (Qin 2016).

I think that it is not unusual to be disposed to one’s field of study in a certain way and to solidarise with informants. What is unusual is that researchers often do not state their disposition. Also, it is not surprising that participants have expectations of us as researchers. Ethnic, national, racial and continental linkages play critical roles in this, and relational affinities, real or assumed, between the researcher and the researched, can prove even more powerful. In my case, the Nigerian migrant who requested that I make Twitter posts hosted me in his Guangzhou apartment for three weeks in 2017. His shop, owned by his elder brother, was my operating base throughout the fieldwork. When he visited Nigeria this year, he hand-delivered my wedding shoes in Lagos. Moreover, I also spent time with the family of the other informant – a Nigerian – and received a personal notification when he had his third child.

So, when they sent *their* stories and invited me to help in bringing attention to *their* struggles as Africans/blacks in the world, it came from a deeply personal place, a place where the researched expect the researcher to be empathetic and responsive. I consider the blending of our agendas as an instance of transnational solidarity in which the researched and researcher shape the understanding of experience and co-produce knowledge. Under this situation, generating knowledge that comes close to grasping the reality of the situation of Africans in China necessitates making open the underlying and unstated influences on my analysis.

Nevertheless, intended disclosure may not be enough to deal with the epistemic burden that I identified. When this happens, as it is probably bound to with me as a Nigerian interested in racial discrimination against Africans in China, a comparative historical approach can prove useful. In embracing this approach, as hinted when I compared the Covid-19 response to HIV/AIDS and Ebola in the beginning, racial discrimination in today’s pandemic control should not be examined in isolation from both past and active epidemics. Especially, attention should be on unravelling the racialised categories that underpin the containment or eradication

of pandemics. To my mind, there is a good chance of reaching productive agreement about the contentions that racism infuses into the management of public health issues when intentioned disclosure and historically informed discernment are prioritised.

Conclusion: Post-Covid-19 and the New Question for Africans in China Studies

The Covid-19 pandemic has presented me with an opportunity to be more critical about Africa–China friendship, without needing to obscure my dispositions and affinities with informants. I am interrogating anew what it means to befriend a continent and whether there is something to gain by critically comparing what China professes abroad (in Africa) and what obtains within its borders. As far as Africa–China friendship is concerned, we should treat both inside and outside of China as a continuum. Africans in China Studies can no longer ignore that the treatment of Africans within China has a role to play in weighing the sincerity of China’s professed friendship abroad. Thus, we need a new form of criticism which transcends the narrative of racism/racial discrimination against Africans as a “mere embarrassment” to China. We need to approach racism as a problem that troubles the entire foundation of Africa–China solidarity and friendship. My disposition to this is that criticism and partnership can co-exist without one crowding out the other; to frame the two as opposites can only weaken South-South solidarity.

特定时期的种族歧视: 新型冠状病毒、立场与“在华非洲人研究”

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自新型冠状病毒 (Covid-19) 在 2020 年3月11日被世界卫生组织宣布为全球大流行病以来, 世界各国一直在努力应对病毒在经济、政治和社会领域带来的灾难性后果。中国在一开始不幸成为这场疫情爆发的中心, 但很快在短时间内设法拉平了疫情曲线。此后, 中国积极帮助其他国家处理这场危机, 与此同时, 也有一些人在指责中国是导致这场全球性疫情危机的罪魁祸首。⁴非洲是中国一系列疫情救援计划的主要受援对象, 救援计划中包括紧急派遣中国医生、提供个人防护装备 (PPE) 和其他医疗物资等。中国的亿万富翁马云也向非洲国家提供了巨额捐款。然而, 在中国忙于与非盟和非洲各个国家商讨如何携手应对新型冠状病毒的蔓延之时

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2020; Mission of the People’s Republic of China to the African Union 2020), 不同的社会舆论也在讨论中国政府如何令人失望地对待或者说未能保护到那些生活在中国境内的非洲人。

2020 年4月初以来, 互联网上出现了一系列视频片段, 非洲人在街上愤怒地陈说在中国遭遇到的种族歧视。在一些片段中, 非洲人控诉中国政府和媒体正在助推“非洲人传播新型冠状病毒”的说法。我们还看到一些图片, 许多非洲人正在广州这个充满活力的商业中心无家可归, 而广州在过去的二十年里接受了全中国最多的非洲移民 (Bodomo 2016)。也有报告称, 非洲人民被强行

暴力驱逐，餐馆和商场禁止黑人进入。无论非洲人的旅行史如何，当地都会对这一群体进行多次隔离（Albert 2020; Asiedu 2020; Olander 2020）。我们还在视频中看到一名尼日利亚外交官不得不进行街头外交：他在一家隔离酒店与中国安全官员和卫生工作者发生争执，在雨中向尼日利亚同胞分发食物。这些视频令人担忧，因为它们似乎证实了中国在面对生活在中国的非洲人和正视中国的种族构成变化方面并没有多大改善（Adebayo and Omololu 2020; Joseph, Sun, and Teya 2017）。

不幸的是，尽管中国驻非洲的外交官们希望——或者说坚持——这类在大流行病中中国对非洲人的种族主义待遇仅是“一个孤立的案例”，但历史证明事实并非如此。长期以来，非洲人一直生活在中国社会的边缘，而种族主义待遇在种族交往互动中十分常见（Bodomo 2020）。许多证据已经表明，非洲人被中国人认为是疾病的传播者，他们一心要“污染”中国人的血统。

（Cheng 2011; Dikötter 1990; Liang and Le Billon 2018; Pfafman, Carpenter, and Tang 2015; Sullivan 1994）当面临严重的公共卫生危机时，非洲面孔在中国人的想象中被认为是病毒的携带者（Hood 2013）。一个例子是面对中国的艾滋病危机，媒体和公共卫生宣传将艾滋病与黑人联系在一起，要求公众远离这一“黑人的疾病”。与之相关的是，在 2014 年西非埃博拉疫情暴发期间，对待非洲人的方式也指向了类似的反应——中国各个省市面对非洲游客和居民的方式往往伴随着种族主义歧视（见 Lin 等发表于 2015 年的评论）。在埃博拉疫情最严重的时候，一名尼日利亚女性告诉我，一名中国医生是如何在她带着她生病的女儿去医院时毫不掩饰地表达了自己的嫌恶态度⁵。

新冠病毒疫情的暴发和 2020 年 4 月之后的事件揭示出在疾病暴发管理中，中国似乎没有在做将黑人身体“他者化”和替罪羊化方面做出重大转变。似乎默认的立场是，在中国的公共卫生暴发危机期间当与非洲人保持距离，即使他们与这种疾病暴发的没有直接联系。

显而易见，关注中国抗疫过程中对非洲人的种族歧视——学者邱昱在本期圆桌论坛中称之为“广州时刻”——对于重新思考学术界如何有效地介入种族、种族主义和仇外心理相关议题，寻求中非友谊的坚实基础至关重要。然而，作为一名在一所非洲大学工作的尼日利亚研究员，我如何在注意到我所处的立场可能带来影响的同时，研究和批判作为非洲人的种族歧视经历？这是我在本期圆桌论坛中思考的核心问题。在下文中，我反思了我所进行的“在华非洲人研究”以及我与被研究对象间的密切关系，以强调在当代中国针对非洲人的种族歧视的相关知识生产中所浮现的认识论负担。更具体地说，通过明确我自身的位置，我希望为提出更多关涉中非友谊基础的关键问题创造空间。

我的个人倾向与“在华非洲人研究”

带着与许多非洲学者进入“非洲研究”领域时一样的精神，我大胆从事了“在华非洲人研究”。非洲学者批判性地面对非洲研究中的经典，并把通过思想上的行动主义与欧洲中心主义相斗争视作是他们的任务之一（Arowosegbe 2014）。不可否认，以这种方式制定他们的任务是一种政治选择，在这种选择中，人们期望挑战关于非洲和非洲人的知识生产中的种种不对称、不平等和等级化结构（Arowosegbe 2014; Krencyova 2014; Schöneberg 2019）。同样，对我来说，我把我在“在华非洲人研究”领域的任务设定为“让底层说话”（Spivak 1988）。我希望看到这个领域以这样一种方式发展，即无论是以中国为中心的观点还是以西方为中心的观点，都不会喧宾夺主地成为从非洲人视角讲述非洲经验的金科玉律。

我从博士期间开展“在华非洲人研究”时就注重强调非洲人视角。这项研究包括我在 2017 年对中国的访问，重点是调查尼日利亚人在广州的迁移和定居经历。在那里，我采访了 52 名尼日利亚人和 17 名中国人⁶，试图了解广州的尼日利亚社群是如何发展演变的，以及种族背景、“非法性”和流散群体内部的社会关系是如何影响尼日利亚人的定居过程的。在从尼日利亚前往中国的旅途中，我面临了一些“流动”的障碍，包括资金问题、签证问题和在白云国际机场遭遇了一次特别麻烦的搜查和询问（Adebayo 2018）。但我依然认为身临其境地“到达那里”去观察和倾听居住在广州的尼日利亚人是至关重要的。‘身临其境’允许我在私人层面认识了一些对话者。2017 年以来，我一直与其中一些人保持着密切联系。

因此，为应对新冠病毒而导致广州的非洲人遭遇种族歧视的消息传出后，我联系了我有点私交的尼日利亚朋友，以了解该城市的实际情况。我最感兴趣的是这期间在中国的尼日利亚人在谈论些什么，以及他们在收集和传播怎样的故事。我的主要信息源是两个尼日利亚人。除了一些视频的分享（其中大部分可以在网上找到），他们还分享了自己机密的语音笔记，并给出了关于他们个人经历的看法。例如，在4月份，其中一位线人于晚上10点在其佛山的公寓中接到了公寓经理的电话。经理打电话通知他，所有外国人都必须前往指定的隔离酒店（QH）接受强制隔离。他的中国妻子希望他等到第二天再看看情况，但他坚持当晚就出发，尽管他并没有做好准备——他连日常用品，包括牙刷和理发刀都没准备。他告诉我：“我不想在中国遇到任何问题。”他担心，如果他不能证明自己遵从命令去了隔离酒店，将来续签签证会很困难——甚至可能无法续签。虽然他没有被强迫或骚扰，但由于不得不与他的妻子和还有三个混血孩子突然分开，他还是感受到了紧张和孤单。

第二位线人更感兴趣的是我如何能帮助他说出关于中国的种族歧视故事。尽管他本人没有受到影响，但他证实酒店和餐馆正在拒绝非洲人。此外，他告诉了我他们在社交媒体上推广的‘中国必须解释’的话题，并邀请我加入传播和讨论。我本打算推迟加入这一“潮流”，但线人的请求推动了我干预活动的进程。我加快了发布视频、推文和转发的速度，我加入了无数呼吁非洲国家和中国采取行动的声音之中。随着新冠病毒的大流行和中国种族歧视状况的加剧，我看到我的研究工作很快与我的线人的活动融合在一起。

然而，我也担心自己在研究中国的种族主义和非洲/黑人歧视这类固有的政治话题时的‘客观性’。这种担忧表现在在知识生产过程中亲缘关系带来的一种困境。当在研究领域纳入自身的情绪时，这种寻求亲缘上的团结就成了一种认知重任。作为一名非洲研究人员，我倾向于证明我确实是并且能够成为针对在华非洲人遭遇的种族主义和种族歧视的“客观”观察者——假设我们都同意客观性的含义，并且承认客观性是知识调查的目标。虽然这种担心是合情合理的，但我也越来越相信，承认和标示我的立场是一种真诚的方式，可以帮助我在这些具有挑战性的认知水域中更好地航行。

“意图透露”与立场

立场（Positionality）指的是研究人员相对于被研究对象所占据的位置，以及更广泛的权力和社会结构，这决定了他们如何参与该领域的研究并收集和解释数据（Mwambari 2019; Qin 2016; da Silva and Webster 2018）。然而，关键之处不在于这些立场本身的存在，而在于研究者是否‘有意透露’它们以及它们可能影响研究过程的方式（Qin 2016）。

我认为以某种方式倾向于自己的研究领域并与线人团结在一起是很正常的。不同寻常的是，研究人员通常不陈述他们的个人倾向。另一方面，调查参与者对我们研究者往往有所期待。民族、国家、种族和大陆之间的联系在这方面起着关键作用，研究人员和被研究人员之间真实的或假定的密切关系可能发挥了更强的联结作用。就我而言，2017年，那个请求我发推特的尼日利亚移民在他广州的公寓里招待了我三周。他的商店归他哥哥所有，是我整个田野调查的基地。今年他回到尼日利亚时，在拉各斯亲手送了我一双婚礼用的鞋子。此外，我还和另一位尼日利亚线人及其家人待了一段时间。当他有了第三个孩子时，他高兴地通知了我。

因此，当他们向我讲述他们的故事并请我帮助他们让更多人关注到他们作为“非洲人”/“黑人”在世界上所需要面临的斗争时，它来自于一种非常个人化的深层期待——被调查者希望研究人员能够感同身受并且积极响应。我想我们工作内容最终走向一致是跨国团结的一个绝佳例子，在这个例子中，被研究者和研究者形成了对经验的理解，并产生了共识。在这种情况下，要想产生接近于在华非洲人现实情况的知识，就需要在分析中揭示那些潜在的和未阐明的影响。

然而，‘意图透露’可能不足以处理我所提到的认知重任。在这种情况下，作为一个对在华非洲人所面临的种族歧视感兴趣的尼日利亚人，纳入历史比较的视角可能是有益的。正如我在一开始比较中国面对新冠病毒、艾滋病毒和埃博拉病毒的反应时所暗示的那样，不应脱离过去的流行病来孤立地审视当下流行病控制中的种族歧视。应该特别注意阐明那些在控制和根除流行

病过程中所出现的种族化分类。在我看来，当强调“意图透露”和历史视角时，我们更有可能就“公共卫生管理中的种族主义”的相关争论达成富有成效的一致。

结论：“新冠病毒之后”和“在华非洲人研究”的新问题

新冠病毒的大流行给了我一个对中非友谊开展更多批评的机会，它不需要遮掩我的情感态度和与线人的密切关系。我正在重新询问成为“一整块非洲大陆的朋友”意味着什么，看看是否能从批判性地比较中国在海外（非洲）所宣传的话语和在国内的实际所为中有所收获。对中非友谊来说，我们应该把中国的内外行为视为一个统一体。“在华非洲人研究”不能再忽视这样一个事实，即中国国内对待非洲人的方式，在衡量中国对外宣传的友谊真诚度方面发挥着作用。因此，我们需要一种新的批评形式，超越那些在中国人心中对非洲人的各类种族主义/种族歧视“仅仅是一种尴尬”的术语。我们需要将种族主义视为困扰整个中非团结和友谊基础的重要问题。我对此的看法是，批评和伙伴关系可以共存，而不会互相排挤，而将两者对立起来只会削弱“南南”团结。

Notes

1. Aljazeera. 2020. China failed to warn public of coronavirus threat for days: AP. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/china-failed-warn-public-covid-19-pandemic-days-ap-200415050833262.html>.
2. Interview with female informant from Nigeria, Guangzhou, 2017.
3. Two students at a Chinese university in the city conducted all 15 interviews with Chinese participants.
4. Aljazeera/半岛电视台. (2020). China failed to warn public of coronavirus threat for days/中国数日未向公众发出病毒威胁警报: AP/美联社. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/china-failed-warn-public-covid-19-pandemic-days-ap-200415050833262.html>.
5. 采访来自一位尼日利亚女性，广州，2017。
6. 两名广州大学生帮助我对15名中国人进行了采访。

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