

Racist Persuasions: How Historical Formations of Chinese Identity Inform Mainland China's Contemporary Views of Africans

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Purpose of The Project

Evaluations of Afro-Chinese relations tend to focus on assessing the 'strategic' economic partnerships made between these regional players – often imbuing the sentiment that Afro-Chinese interactions are a recent phenomenon. However, these approaches offer limited analysis of the extensive and webbed histories that inform the grounds of contemporary Afro-Chinese associations. In this project, I examine historic interactions between Africans and Mainland Chinese in Mainland China, paying particular attention to the perceptions the Chinese had of Africans. I juxtapose my findings with present cases that convey the *de facto* and *de jure* articulations of Africans in Mainland China, today. It is my hope that this analysis offers a critical lens at understanding the identity politics that in-part drive the emerging wave of Afro-Chinese partnerships and bring awareness to the complexity of these solidarities.

Findings

A primary determinant in the formation of Han identity is the perception of 'what it is not'. This method of comparison led to a tactic of 'othering' that was driven by inferences made in associating values to phenotypic traits. The Han upheld themselves as a 'civilized' people and deemed non-Han peoples as being barbaric. These ascriptions of civility mirror sentiments expressed by the colonial missions in Africa; however, they are documented to have been employed as early as the 7th Century, illustrating that discriminatory perceptions of people occurred in the 'East' independent of interactions with the 'West'. The emergence of the term *Kunlun* (which is associated as being a racial slur), in the literature at this time, signifies how darker-skinned people were reduced to solely being slaves and/or servants in China. The term would later evolve from being a broadly used-term to explicitly referring to African peoples around the 14th Century. Beliefs of 'inherent' value determinable by skin colour remain in China today. The use of blackface in state-sanctioned television programming, the continued production of colourist and racist soap advertisements as well as the recent photo-exhibition of Africans showcased in comparison to wild animals in China, indicate how African peoples continue to be portrayed as being barbaric, dirty and worthy of ridicule. As such, contemporary espousals of *de jure* brotherhood and solidarity amongst these regions whilst *de facto* prejudice remain intact beg the question of what Afro-Chinese relations will look like in the future.

Project Development and Presentation

The paper that culminated out of this research project was the fruit of extensive review and dissection of scholarly literature, interviews and media sources. These sources richly informed my understanding of the formation of Chinese Han identity, the history of Afro-Chinese interactions and helped me gain a pulse of the realities surrounding 'Africanity' in China today. Upon undergoing multiple rounds of review, I submitted my paper for subsequent approval from the National Council for Black Studies so as to be able to present my findings at their Annual Academic Conference. I was granted this opportunity and presented my work on a panel alongside Prof. Mock who presented on some of her present research, respectively. Answering the many questions fielded, post my presentation, provided a unique opportunity to contribute my thoughts to academic conversation and glean from the insights of the vast-array of Africana scholars present; all of which have encouraged me to continue asking questions and to be diligent to account for the nuances that inform lived realities, in my work.

Faculty Mentor: Professor Tara Mock

Funded by the Grua O'Connell Fellowship