

State Regulation, Pandemic, and Africans in South China

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During the Covid-19 pandemic, African nationals were maltreated in Guangdong Province, China. African students and businesspeople were forced to undergo additional quarantine and nucleic acid tests. Meanwhile, they were unwelcomed on the street, at their places of work and even their accommodations. In contrast to the pro-Africa diplomatic policy of the state authority, the discriminative treatment that African nationals received in China reflects a hybrid ideology of Chinese nationalism, racism, and patriarchy. Sino-African relations in Chinese society are deteriorating.

Keywords: Sino-African relation, Covid-19, racism, nationalism, migrant

Introduction

Sino-African relations face immense challenges amid the Covid-19 pandemic. In the past decade, the Belt and Road initiative enhanced the political-economic ties of the African continent and China. Tedros Adhanom, endorsed by the African Union to serve as Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) since 2017, is believed to strongly support the Chinese government's actions during the epidemic. Thus, the WHO has been criticized by the United States and most western countries that claimed China should be responsible for the spread of Covid-19. The close relationship between Tedros Adhanom and Chinese President Xi Jinping partly shows China's strategy of collaborating with African authorities to dominate decision making in some influential international organizations.

In contrast to the pro-Africa policy of the state authority, a wave of racial discrimination towards Africans during the pandemic has caused serious diplomatic conflicts between some African countries and China. Since April 2020, diplomats and politicians from Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and the African Union expressed strong disapproval of the discriminative treatment that Africans received in China, especially in Guangzhou city, the capital of Guangdong Province in southern China. African students and businesspeople in Guangzhou were forced into additional quarantine and took more than four times the average number of nucleic acid tests. Control measures on Africans were far stricter than for other foreigners and local people. Besides, many cases showed that Africans were unwelcomed on the street, at their places of work and even their accommodations. Some Africans were evicted by landlords and had no place to sleep at night. Hate speeches and rumors of "Africans are virus-carriers" were prevalent on the internet, deepening the racial antagonism against Africans (especially people from Sub-Saharan Africa). Such discrimination is not new in Chinese society.

To keep the diplomatic conflict from getting worse, the Guangzhou government swiftly revised its policy towards Africans. However, local people still hold a hostile and discriminative attitude towards the African community. Isolated from the international BLM (“Black Lives Matter”) movement, the racial discrimination towards black people in China is hybridized with the dominant Chinese nationalism. Although volunteer groups in Guangzhou were trying to change the disappointing situation of “Afrophobia” during the pandemic, their efforts were rejected by the African community due to a long period of distrust.



A shop providing long-distance call service in Sanyuanli, Guangzhou

“Afrophobia” in China during the Pandemic

Scholars have used the term “Afrophobia” to describe the racial antagonism towards Africans in China (as cited in Cheng, 2011). During the Covid-19 pandemic, a high wave of “Afrophobia” arose again.

On April 10, 2020, a video of a Nigerian diplomat in China, Razaq Lawal, emerged on the Internet (see Nasir, 2020). In the video, Lawal publicly criticized a Chinese official for Nigerians being maltreated in Guangzhou. Lawal accused Chinese officials and policemen of seizing Nigerians’ passports and forcing Nigerians and other African people to do additional quarantine. According to Lawal, Nigerian citizens were asked to self-quarantine for 14 days upon arriving in China. After they took the nucleic acid test, they had to undergo another 14 days quarantine even if they tested negative.

In addition to new arrivals, African residents already in Guangzhou were forced to quarantine and take tests as well. A university student, Anda, complained that at the time when the coronavirus broke out, the police immediately went to his house for a passport check and stuck a note on the door requesting him not to go outside. His quarantine lasted more than four weeks. Despite Anda testing negative four times, the university still forbade him from using the lab. Almost every African in Guangzhou received such treatment, which had a negative impact on their lives and work. “The outbreak of the coronavirus began in Wuhan, China, not Africa.” Anda expressed his discontent. As they kept quarantining alone, African community members were not able to help one another. Government employees came to their houses every three days to bring them food and daily necessities [1]. In the gathering areas where African communities run business and socialized, shopping centers and restaurants were closed, and all passersby were stopped by the police for passport checks. A large number of Africans became homeless and were rejected by hotels, too (Marsh et al, 2020).

The unacceptable treatment that the African community received in Guangzhou stems from two main reasons. The first reason relates to the pressure on the Guangzhou government to prevent imported coronavirus cases and community infection. On April 7, the Guangzhou government reported 111 imported cases, including 86 Chinese nationals and 25 foreigners. 19 Africans tested positive, among whom were four Nigerians who had visited the same restaurant (Guangzhou Municipal Health Commission, 2020). The result made the government highly anxious about a potential second wave of coronavirus in China. Government officers conducted a total investigation of all foreigners from high risk countries, especially targeting the African community.

Secondly, hate speech and rumors on Chinese social media deepened the hostility and racial discrimination against Africans. On April 4, it was reported on the news that a Nigerian national with Covid-19 violated the forced quarantine policy and attacked a female nurse. Later, inflammatory speech emerged on the Internet, such as “While China is getting stronger, Chinese people are still being beaten by foreigners?” Images of black people saying things like “Chinese get out of here!” widely appeared online (Matouqingnian, 2020). Sparks of sensitive Chinese nationalism were exacerbated by deep-rooted negative stereotypes of black people.

The Guangzhou government quickly noticed that the public anger was misguided, contradicting the state pro-Africa ideology. Besides, the government did not want to embroil itself in a diplomatic row. At a press conference on April 7, an official claimed that the widespread rumors of 300,000 Africans in Guangzhou as potential virus-carriers were not true at all. The official said that the Guangzhou government had quarantined 3,779 foreigners, without mentioning the particular numbers of Africans. Several days later, the Guangzhou government issued an announcement titled “Together We Shall Beat Covid-19, Together We shall Build a Bright Future – A Letter to Everyone in Guangzhou” in Chinese, English, French, Japanese, and Korean, claiming that “no entity or individual shall restrict or deny specific groups of people from checking in at hotels, renting properties or entering into public places such as residential blocks, shopping malls or parks, on the basis of nationality, skin color or gender”. The government also stated that it has “zero tolerance over discriminatory language or acts” (General Office of Guangzhou Command Center for Covid-19 Control and Prevention, 2020).

Low-end Globalization, “Illegality”, and the Contradictory Regulation

The 1955 Bandung Conference marked the beginning of China’s pro-Africa diplomatic policy. Due to the worsening of relations between China and the Soviet Union in the mid 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) had to seek international support apart from the Soviet Union and the US. During the 1960s and the 1970s, although the domestic economy was still weak, China insisted on aiding developing African countries in multiple aspects, including military power, agriculture, various industries, railways, and medical training. Guided by the Maoist “Three Worlds” political theory, “aid Africa” became an important practice to show the CCP’s solidarity with third world people/comrades. A successful diplomatic outcome of the “aid Africa” policy was the recognition of the People’s Republic of China as the only legitimate representative of China to the United Nations, thus removing the collective representatives of Chiang Kai-shek’s regime from the United Nations. In the final voting of the United Nations General Assembly in 1971, African countries contributed 26 votes for the Beijing government, occupying one third of the affirmative votes. Besides providing aid to African allies, the Beijing government also set up exchange programs and scholarships for African students.

The Sino-African relationship mainly developed on an official level for a long time. Frequent interactions by people on a large scale started after China opened its domestic market for global trade. After 1997, the impact of the Asian Financial Crisis pushed African businessmen to leave former Asian trade centers, like Bangkok or Jakarta, and to turn to Guangzhou, a city near Hong Kong with a long history of foreign trade.

From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, Guangzhou experienced a rapid growth in African immigration, developing the largest African community in China. Exact numbers of the African population were always ambiguous, since there existed a considerable number of undocumented Africans in Guangzhou and the surrounding cities. In 2007, local media claimed that more than 200,000 Africans were living in Guangzhou (Lan, 2015). However, immigration office statistics showed that there were only around 1,000 African residents in Guangzhou in 2006 (Li et al, 2008). Scholars estimated the population should be 15,000 to 20,000 (Lan, 2017). The huge gaps between these numbers indicated that local Chinese people might lack general knowledge about African immigrants.

Before the National People’s Congress enacted the new Exit-Entry Administration Law in 2012, Guangdong Province had conducted several local regulations to manage the Sanfei foreigners. By the definition of the government, Sanfei means “triple illegal”: enter illegally, stay illegally, and work illegally (Lan, 2017). The Guangzhou government used a “campaign-style” strategy – concentrating management at particular areas over a period of time – to maximize police power, mobilize the society, and to overawe the “illegal” population. Today, the government is able to give an accurate number of the African population. On April 12, 2020, the mayor of Guangzhou said that there were 13,625 Africans in Guangzhou by the end of 2019 (Information Office of Guangzhou Municipal People’s Government, 2020).

Migrants come from every African country, among whom the top five groups are Nigerians, Senegalese, Malians, Guineans, and Ghanaians (as cited in Lan, 2017). African communities in Guangzhou are located at two major trading hubs, the Tianxiu Mansion at Xiaobei, and Guangyuan West Road at Sanyuanli. The majority of Africans in Guangzhou are merchants and middlemen, who

purchase goods from Chinese factories to sell back to Africa. Scholarly observations describe the emerging transnational trade network from Guangzhou to Africa as “low-end globalization” or “globalization from below”, referring to informal transnational flow of migrants and products among developing countries (Mathews et al, 2017). Unlike the large multinational enterprises, this kind of cross-border business is small, informal, and sometimes semi-legal or illegal. African businessmen purchase low-cost costumes, commodities, electronics, and other goods manufactured in China. These goods include copies and knockoffs, so traders and logistic merchants usually need to make deals with businesses through bribes and tax evasions. Since businesses are relatively small and precarious, interpersonal trust is essential for this form of globalization.

Most African traders hold a thirty-day tourist or business visa bought from agents. Businessmen who are able to invest and pay taxes in China can easily renew their short-term visas every six months or every year, but it is difficult for small traders to renew their visas. Some choose to overstay their visa for completing the business transaction or earning more money. Nigerians are often identified as constituting the largest number of visa overstayers in Guangzhou. It is believed that Nigerians are on the Chinese immigration office’s “blacklist” (Lan, 2017). This might be related to an incident that happened in 2009. A Nigerian citizen was reported dead while fleeing from a police passport check. His death caused hundreds of Africans to take to the streets and surround one police station in Guangzhou. The difficulty of visa renewing has resulted in the inflation of visa fees on the black market. Visas are unaffordable for many traders who wish to live in China legally.

As Lan (2017) has pointed out, Chinese state regulations on Africans have produced the “illegal” African in China. Under the objective of population control, the informality that commonly exists in the African community has been erased by police power. By Mathew’s (2017) description, the informal practice among the African community in China often breaks the law, but it does not mean that they are immoral. As for visa overstaying cases, the difficulty of visa renewing for certain African nationals should be taken into consideration. Moreover, the structural racism in Chinese immigration enforcement and the uneven application of state power in different places in China makes the state regulation contradictory (Lan, 2017; Mathews, 2017). Chinese immigration officers and police sometimes reject the visa renewing application or cancel the visa of someone whose looks or manner they do not like (Mathews, 2017). Compared to whites, black people are more likely to be stopped by the police on the street. To escape the severe police check problem in Guangzhou, Africans who overstay their visas move to other cities in Guangdong Province, like Foshan or Nanhai, as immigration control there is much more relaxed.



A Muslim restaurant run by Uyghurs in Sanyuanli, Guangzhou

Against Racism: How Far Can We Reach?

In early April, noticing that Africans were evicted from home or kept in forced quarantine, some Chinese in Guangzhou organized volunteer groups to help them. The volunteer groups collected information on food and accommodations, translated governmental prevention policies and useful messages, and arranged and delivered daily necessities to Africans. However, their efforts in assisting Africans were informed to the police by some Chinese, accusing them of “intentionally spreading the virus” (Bai, 2020). The African community was cautious, too. Some online chat rooms for Africans rejected them from joining, suspecting them as being “spies for the police”. Trust between Africans and Chinese is weakening [2].

It should not be neglected that an anti-African movement once appeared in Chinese universities during the 1980s. Students in Nanjing, Beijing, and Tianjin organized protests to expell African students from campus. In their arguments, because of the pro-Africa state policy, African students were treated better than Chinese students. Local students were angry to see Africans getting scholarships, living in better rooms, and even dating Chinese girls (Kristof, 1988; Southerl, 1988). The anti-Africa movement expressed students’ discontent with the government, and ironically, it combined with the pro-democratic movement in the late 1980s. Anti-African slogans were used together with appeals for political reform and human rights (Cheng, 2011).

The fear of Africans “robbing” Chinese women contributes to the backlash over the proposed regulation on permanent residency for foreigners in China which was announced in March of 2020. Despite the regulation having strict requirements on education, property, and skill, many Chinese

expressed strong opposition to it. Provocative speeches said the regulation gives super-national treatment to foreigners, especially migrants and “refugees” from African and Arabic countries. Nationalists are afraid that the regulation will encourage African-Chinese intermarriage and destroy the purity of Chinese blood and culture. On popular social media, hashtags like “Chinese boys protect Chinese girls” and “Chinese girls only marry Chinese boys” emerged. Such racial and sexual discrimination reflects a hybrid ideology of nationalism, racism, and patriarchy that is becoming popular among young Chinese people.

Michel Foucault (2003) has analyzed two forms of state racism in the twentieth century. One is Nazism, a murderous biopower meant to protect a superior race. Another is Stalinist Socialism, which mobilizes an entire society to eliminate a particular class. The state disciplines the entire social body to universally desire biopower and sovereignty, and racism becomes the only way to guarantee these goals. The growing statist nationalism in today’s China represents a strong tendency of racial antagonism. While official propaganda depicts a pro-Africa and “aid Africa” attitude, state regulations and the public opinion are controlled by a structurally racist ideology. Moreover, as China is stepping into a post-pandemic era, it seems that the total surveillance of the population (including its own people and foreigners) will become normalized.

Notes

1. Anda’s statement is cited from an online Zoom meeting titled “What did Africans living in China go through during the pandemic?”, held on June 19, 2020, organized by Y-talks(青年系列講座). Anda was one of the invited speakers. The record of the meeting is available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1TsjXxUONUyVzmgJJkBOFIYKgkVHbWkZE/view?usp=sharing/>. (Accessed July 16, 2020).

2. The information of the voluntary group is cited from a sharing meeting titled “Sino-Africanism in Guangzhou 2.0”. The meeting was held on May 9, 2020 by an online anthropological reading group. The transcript and information of the meeting is available at: <https://shimo.im/docs/jQWWW6WDqRC6h9Tp/read/>. (Accessed July 16, 2020).

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