

## An African perspective on African Studies in China

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**A**frican Studies' in China is a relatively recent scholastic initiative and tradition.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that general knowledge on, or interest in Africa is new in China. Nevertheless, the recent pursuit to build and grow expertise in 'African Studies' has become a source of interest and focus of the Chinese academic community and government over the past 60 years. However, the challenges Chinese scholars face with regard to the tradition and relevance of 'African Studies' mirror those faced by Western scholars.

Despite the major strides being made in adding to the repositories of knowledge at various higher learning institutions across China, and the growing number of scholars interested in engaging in scholarship on Africa and about Africans, there is a continued 'othering' of Africans, their ideas, realities and scholastic traditions. Maurice Duverger, Edward Said, and Archie Mafeje all argued that researchers engaged in the social sciences are bound by particular value systems which are then reflected in the way they conceptualize and frame their research, hypothesize, or collate information.<sup>2</sup> This is no different in China, where most Chinese scholars studying Africa, African peoples and their thoughts or realities are primarily informed by Euro-American scholarly traditions. Furthermore, some of them are funded by, and follow, policy directives from government. The totality of these experiences means that a lot of time is spent regurgitating, reformulating, or replicating often biased, racist, and outmoded epistemological and empirical research frameworks.

Scholars such as Tandeka Nkiwane and Paulin Hountondji make it very clear that social sciences such as Ethnology or International Relations need to strip off the Eurocentric epistemic lens upon which they heavily rely.<sup>3</sup> This is exemplified in research on Africa-China relations, through an over-reliance on 'experts' who are divorced from the political, social or economic realities of Africa, but who then claim to speak on behalf of all Africans. It is also crucially important that Chinese scholars preserve a sense of academic freedom, in order to provide more incisive critique, research and debate on the political economy of Africans around the world.

Most importantly, although Mafeje was optimistic that 'African Studies' would open paths for the veracity and value of Africanity and African scholarship, there are still indications that efforts to develop this field of study within Chinese academic discourse serves particular interests. As an African scholar in China, I can only hope that these interests are mindful of the subjective bias, epistemological flaws, and often racist nature of 'African Studies' and its traditions worldwide. This mindfulness would create a healthy culture of self-reflexivity and critique within Chinese academic discourse, which would complement scholarship by Africans, African and Africanist ideas, histories, and realities.

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### Notes

- 1 I put African studies in inverted comas because although it is commonly used to demarcate an area of scholarship, it is also subject to intense criticism from African scholars regarding its scholastic traditions and epistemologies.
- 2 Duverger, M. 1968. *Sociologie Politique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, pp.11-12; Mafeje, A. 2008. 'Africanity: A Combative Ontology', *CODESRIA Bulletin* 384:59-115;109-110; Said, E.W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, pp.2-4.
- 3 See footnote in Hountondji, P. 2009. 'Knowledge of Africa, Knowledge by Africans: Two Perspectives on African Studies', *RCCS Annual Review* 1, National University of Benin, African Centre for Advanced Studies, p.4; also see, Nkiwane, T.C. 2001. 'Africa and International Relations: Regional Lessons for a Global Discourse', *International Political Science Review* 22(3):279-290; Zondi, S. 2015. 'Decolonial Humanism and Africa's Presence in International Diplomacy', *CODESRIA Bulletin*.

## Bridging the gap: blackness and Sino-African relations

Keisha A. Brown

**A** 2016 television commercial for a Chinese laundry detergent featured an African man who, after being placed in a washing machine, emerged with white skin.

In 2017, the Hubei Provincial Museum exhibit entitled 'This Is Africa' displayed a series of diptychs, each one containing a photo of an African person juxtaposed with the face of an animal, such as a monkey, giraffe, or lion.

A skit in the nationally broadcasted 2018 CCTV Chinese New Year celebration program centered around the theme of Sino-African relations. Although it was meant to promote and praise ongoing economic and political developments, the execution of the theme was especially problematic in terms of its depiction of Africans. An African woman was performed by a Chinese actress in blackface with exaggerated physical features. This portrayal of African women was accented by African men costumed as animals, including monkeys and zebras.

In each of the above examples, African identities were replaced by whiteness, Chinese caricatures, or animals resulting in the misrepresentation of Africans, the erasure of racial identity, and the denial of humanity. Furthermore, these images were presented in Chinese spaces where they would be consumed by a vast audience of Chinese citizens, resulting in the widespread dissemination of problematic portrayals of Africans imbedded with racist connotations and stereotypes. Surprisingly, these incidents are occurring against the backdrop of increased Sino-African relations and the continual growth of African Studies in China. In the last decade, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and other related bureaus of the Chinese government supported the creation of numerous academic spaces in China devoted to African Studies. Just at the moment when there has been a steady increase in new scholarship by Chinese Africanists demonstrating the vitality and potential of African Studies, trade between China and various African nations has also increased, thus leading to more contact between these peoples. Considering these developments, how have such stereotypes and misunderstandings persisted? What role can an understanding of Black identity play in shifting these discourses?

To fully address the complexities and nuances of Sino-African relations, centering identity, specifically around the concept of Blackness, would enrich African Studies research by Chinese scholars. Blackness is not just a racial categorization based on skin color, but also encompasses history, culture, society, and politics as it relates to the struggles of peoples of the African diaspora. The performance of race as identity is a constant negotiation of disavowal, affiliation, and exclusion. Treating race as performative allows one to differentiate between audience and performer to discuss the racial frameworks in China shaping perceptions and representations of Blackness, as well as how said frameworks and beliefs are upheld or challenged. Chinese Africanists' critical engagement with the performativity of Blackness could reshape discourses in two crucial ways. First, critical engagement with the ways in which Blackness has been depicted and commodified by non-Blacks, especially in colonial or oppressive spaces, would lead to a recognition of how racializing the 'other' has historically shaped representations or conceptualizations of Blackness. Second, examining the ways Africans choose to express their own Black identities can both counteract and widen the narrow historically constructed representations by inserting the multiplicities of African identity into scholarly conversations. In concurrence with other existing and newly emerging scholarship, work that engages Blackness as an analytical frame would draw attention to the national and transnational aspects of Sino-African relations and has the potential to connect political and economic trends to social and cultural contexts to reflect the unique ways these components intertwine and continue to take shape.

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## African Studies with Chinese characteristics? A perspective and a vision

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**A**frican Studies in the United States gained momentum after the passing of the National Defense Education Act in 1958 (Title VI), followed by a substantial expansion of federal funding for area studies. Two years later, as the world celebrated 'the Year of Africa', the appointment of a Joint Committee on African Studies by the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies officially marked the coming of age of Africa as an area field in the US academy. This postwar burgeoning of area studies was in part prompted by the Cold War competition between the superpowers.

African Studies in China is still in its infancy. While African Studies programs in China can be traced back to the early 1960s when the Institute of West-Asian and African Studies and the Institute of Asian and African Studies were established at the Chinese Academy

of Social Sciences and Peking University, respectively, research outputs and government support were modest until the end of the previous century. The rapid proliferation of African Studies programs over the last decade or so coincided with the rise of China on the global stage and, in particular, its increasing presence and influence in Africa since the beginning of the new millennium.

With the recently launched Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese government support to area studies centers will only continue to expand. However, the numerical growth of programs and centers does not necessarily bring about a genuine flourishing of scholarship. Often, it masks and belies a false blossoming of research. As the old Chinese idiom goes, "it takes ten years to grow a tree, but a hundred to nurture the people." A good educational program takes time to develop and mature.

Looking forward, I am confident that the prospects of African Studies in China are bright. However, it should not become a replica of Euro-American African Studies. While much remains for Chinese Africanists to learn from their foreign colleagues, they could contribute more to the field if they approach Africa from a different standpoint and fully leverage the history and experience of the Chinese society. For example, urbanization in Africa bears similarities with Chinese urbanization in multiple dimensions. Job creation and the shortage of affordable housing are shared challenges facing numerous cities both in Africa and in China. There is a pronounced tendency amongst Chinese Africanists to believe that the experience of China's development over the last four decades offers a model for Africa as the continent aspires to develop and prosper.

In my view, issues such as post-conflict reconstruction, long-term rule of governing parties, religious and ethnic policies, the decline of marriage and family, and rapid industrialization provide an essential common ground for China and African countries to learn from each other. Although exploring these subjects in Africa does not produce an immediate solution to similar problems in China (or vice versa), it does help Chinese scholars and practitioners better appreciate and acknowledge such issues from a global and transnational perspective.

While it is legitimate for Chinese scholars and government officials to promote various merits of the China Model, it is equally critical for us to realize the invaluable experience that African countries offer to China. As a Chinese Africanist, I often say to myself as well as to my students: In many ways, Africa is a mirror, which forces us to stare at ourselves, bring the entire world into view, and build a shared moral conscience for all of humankind.

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The Peking University Centre for African Studies was founded in 1998 as a university-wide, interdisciplinary institution for comprehensive African research. It consists of faculty and research fellows from different departments and institutes, who specialize in African politics, economy, and cultures. Currently, the Center is collaborating with the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences to develop an African Studies certificate, the first of its kind in Chinese universities. This new curriculum program will enhance the education and research of Africa among Chinese university students. The Center's two flagship publications are the *PKU African Tele-Info* (a weekly newsletter) and the *Annual Review of African Studies in China*.