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To cite this article: Wei Wang, Andrew Pau Hoang & Lucy Porter Jordan (2023) The intimate affliction of vicarious racialization: Afro-Chinese couples in South China, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 24:3, 397-412, DOI: [10.1080/14649373.2023.2209425](https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2023.2209425)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649373.2023.2209425>



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Published online: 23 Jun 2023.



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The intimate affliction of vicarious racialization: Afro-Chinese couples in South China

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ABSTRACT



Racial prejudice and discrimination towards Africans in Guangzhou have been widely documented and are systemic. Nonetheless, conjugal unions and family formation between Chinese citizens and members of the African diaspora have become more prevalent in recent years. Together, Afro-Chinese couples confront quotidian threats of violence, arrest, and deportation of the African partners, which threats affect their families and livelihoods. Studies thus far have neglected the complex dynamics and negotiations of racism that manifest in the interracial domestic sphere. Through reflexive observational fieldwork and qualitative interviews, this study provides a contemporary analysis of negotiating racism in intimate family life, especially from the unique standpoint of the Chinese spouse in an Afro-Chinese marriage. Drawing upon empirical data and the Althusserian notion of interpellation, we develop the concept of the intimate affliction of vicarious racialization to analyze how multiple inequities intersect and condition the couples' overlapping lived experiences. Vicarious racialization particularly emphasizes processes by which Chinese women become interpellated but also resist anti-Black racism. This intimate affliction destabilizes the prevailing discourse on racism, which focuses on targeted (racialized) minorities, and the dichotomy of direct/indirect discrimination against them. This study highlights the often-overlooked role of women's agency across multiple borderlands with their partners as they negotiate gendered, racialized, and classed subjections in familial and social spaces.

KEYWORDS

Interracial marriage; interpellation; intimate affliction; vicarious racialization; China-Africa

Introduction

As China has been integrated into the global economic system, social interactions among diverse social groups have increased. In recent decades, growing ties with African countries have sparked an increased presence of the African population in China (Li, Lyons, and Brown 2012). Since the beginning of the Africa-to-China inflow, Guangzhou—China's third-largest city—has hosted the largest number of Africans (Bodomo 2015). These unfolding mobilities and settlements have received extensive attention among academics, with “more social scientists wandering around *Xiaobei* (known as ‘Africa Town’) than anywhere else on earth!” (Mathews, Lin, and Yang 2017, 56). Studies of Africans in Guangzhou have mostly emphasized the trade-related interactions

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between African businesspeople and their Chinese counterparts (Bork-Hüffer et al. 2016; Li, Ma, and Xue 2009; Li, Lyons, and Brown 2012; Lyons, Brown, and Zhigang 2012; Lyons and Ford 2008). Only a handful of studies over the past few years (Adebayo and Omololu 2020; Chui, Jordan, and Wang 2019; Jordan et al. 2021; Lan 2017; Mathews, Lin, and Yang 2017; Zhou 2017) have examined Afro-Chinese intermarriages in Guangzhou.

Intermarriages between Chinese and foreign nationals reflect a structural “turn” towards the privatization of marriage in post-socialist China (Davis 2014). In other cosmopolitan Chinese cities, intermarriages have been formally studied since the 1980s, including middle- and upper-class families and couples in Shenzhen (Clark 2001) and Shanghai (Farrer 2008). This period in China has been characterized as the opening-up of “ethnosexual” frontiers and interracial sexual fields (Farrer 2010), where previously, among Chinese women seeking foreign contacts, mostly white men from Western countries were idealized as having higher status (Zurndorfer 2018). Contemporary societal codes that privilege white or paler skin over darker complexions were systematically analyzed by Frazier and Zhang (2014). In making sense of the public condemnation of Lou Jing (a television show contestant with an African American father and Chinese mother), they highlighted the anti-Black racism reflected in netizens’ assertions that she “and other Black people in China defiled the country’s honor” (Frazier and Zhang 2014, 243). Several racially motivated insults were directed at Lou’s mother, as her relationship with Lou’s biological father was considered an extramarital affair. The societal judgment and backlash in social media surrounding this family’s circumstances reveal the prejudicial layers of ascribed “im/moral” intimacies that shape mixed-racial familyhood in contemporary China.

In Guangzhou, anti-African/anti-Black racism and discrimination are regularly directed toward African people, their partners, and their families (Lan 2017; Mathews, Lin, and Yang 2017). Racism exists at structural (society-wide), cultural, and interpersonal levels and refers to the various ways that people are pushed down, held back, and mistreated because they are ethnically or racially different from the dominant group (Dumbrill and Yee 2018). Anti-Black racism (a term originating from the Atlantic slave trade and the invention of “race” through white European colonization in the West) is the particular form of racism directed towards Black people, those perceived to be “Black,” or those discursively inscribed as “Black.” Racism is not necessarily based on skin color and phenotypical differences alone. It can manifest as “xeno-racism” when ideologically constructed alongside alterity— notions of “otherness” that intersect with religions, cultures, and migration statuses outside the dominant status quo.

The effects of anti-Black, xeno-racist, ideological inscriptions from without were vividly described by the philosopher and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon in what is perhaps the most well-known excerpt from his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (Fanon 1986). His “Look, a Negro” passage (Fanon 1986, 109–113) phenomenologically describes the moment on a train when Fanon’s Blackness was called forth by a child who became frightened at the sight of him. As the child shouted to his own mother in fear, Fanon “discovered his Blackness” (112) through dissociating nausea, for he was no longer simply a “physiological self” (111) or “man among men” (112) but a confluence of historical-racial constructs that mapped slavery, intellectual deficiency, and other racist stereotypes onto his very being:

On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood? (Fanon 1986, 112)

This “calling forth” of a particular subject position from without and the resultant shape-shifting of self-conscious, bodily schemata would later be conceptualized as a process of ideological

interpellation by the French philosopher Louis Althusser (2006). Althusser saw ideology as interpellating (or hailing) individuals to become a certain way, recruiting but also transforming them to identify with dominant rituals and thus to become “good” (dominated) subjects.

Utterances such as “Look, a Negro!” (Fanon 1986, 111) or “Hey, you there!” (Althusser 2006, 86) seize individuals and call upon them to figuratively turn around, conceding to a process of self-recognition as the hailed ones. However, anti-Black racism as an ideology in China exceeds the individual prejudices and discriminatory acts of individuals, for it is historically and structurally conditioned into the fabric of social life. As discourses, these utterances reflect power relationships that circulate across societal systems, and social relations to (re)produce subjects and knowledge about those very subjects. This leaves open the question of whether and how racial ideologies and interpellation occur in/through Afro-Chinese intermarriages.

Chinese spouses (usually wives) are also affected by this everyday racism, including questioning and cautionary pressures from parents and other family members regarding their marriage choices (Lan 2017). Beyond conceptualizing these experiences as “blame” or “critique” (Frazier and Zhang 2014), it is worthwhile to consider whether/how Chinese wives themselves could experience a process of interpellation or racialization. Such an analysis would reveal the limits of common understandings of racism that emphasize the impact of prejudice, discrimination, and oppression directed solely at racialized groups.

Building upon prior research on the discrimination of Africans in Guangzhou, we analyze the historical, social, and cultural forces that contribute to the social reproduction of anti-Black racism and xeno-racism. First, we examine systemic discrimination against Africans in Guangzhou through a genealogical analysis that locates a history of the present. Debates about contemporary racism towards Africans in China have gradually intensified in public discourse since the 1960s. Second, we analyze this systemic discrimination and its manifestation in the contemporary domestic sphere, drawing upon field research encounters and interviews with Afro-Chinese couples in Guangzhou. We highlight the case of Ellen to illustrate how anti-Black/anti-African racism in China constitutes and is constituted by forms of governance in and through the family system. In the final section, we elaborate upon our conceptualization of vicarious racialization as an “intimate affliction.” In so doing, we highlight the often-overlooked role of women’s agency through multiple borderlands, negotiating the intersections of racialized, gendered, and classed subjections alongside their African partners in contemporary South China.

Discrimination against Africans in Guangzhou and China

Large-scale immigration of African foreign traders and the resultant growth of diasporic African communities have altered the ethno-racial landscape of Guangzhou (Bodomo 2010; Bodomo and Ma 2012). Reciprocally, China’s economic expansion into Africa has included financial support and infrastructure development for its African allies, operated by its state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Lee 2017). China’s official statement has been to promote transracial political solidarity (Fennell 2013), including Sino-African diplomatic relations. However, such discourses of solidarity seem to exist mostly within statements rather than reality, as it is not uncommon for African communities’ experiences in Guangzhou to contradict China’s diplomatic discourse.

Xeno-racism in contemporary China

Contemporary experiences of anti-Black racism in China emerge from a long history of racial formation. Castillo (2020) periodizes anti-Black racism in China and its semiotic multiplicities into

four main stages, from premodern encounters with Blackness during the Tang [618–907 CE] and Song [960–1279 CE] dynasties to the current “post-socialist” moment. Conceptualizations of anti-Black racism are shaped alongside a political consolidation of the Han ethnicity and a strengthened nationalist Chinese image by “resisting foreign powers, increasing internal cohesion and legitimizing sovereignty” (Castillo 2020, 313). Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, several historical-racial events contextualize the formation of anti-Black racism as a salient feature of public discourse today.

African students—mostly of elite backgrounds—began arriving in China in 1960 under a government program offering fully funded tertiary education to “win hearts and minds” in the wake of the Sino-Soviet split (Sautman 1994). In the 1960s, Mao Zedong repeatedly met with civil rights leaders such as W. E. B. Du Bois, despite a highly controlled and tightly governed socialist China. The official rhetoric of promoting Africa–China relations was not always reflected at the grassroots level (Cheng 2011; Fennell 2013). Expressions of racism towards Africans were especially severe in the 1970s and 1980s, such as the Shanghai Incident of 1979, where 16 foreign students—including Yemeni and Malian ones—were stoned and attacked with bricks and later hospitalized for playing loud music during an examination period, amongst other accusations. Other expressions include incidents at Tianjin University (in 1986) and, perhaps the most well-known, the Hohai University incidents from December 1988 to January 1989. This event concerned two African men who wanted to bring Chinese women back to their dorm for Christmas Eve. A conflict quickly escalated to involve thousands of other Chinese students. African students as a group were targeted with xenophobic remarks to “go back to Africa” and were accused of being AIDS carriers. Eventually, the local government needed to evacuate the African students from campus (Cheng 2011).

These were quite clear expressions of racist and prejudiced sentiments towards Africans. However, when they were raised as concerns or questions by African diplomats and community leaders, they were obscured by Chinese officials’ coded (non-racial) explanations for anti-Africanism. Slogans by Chinese demonstrators which called for Blacks to be expelled from China were labeled by officials as “erroneous.” Racial persecution of Black students by Chinese citizens was decidedly a manifestation of “frustration aggression” (Sautman 1994). Clashes between African and Chinese students reflected general xenophobia, with roots in China’s past humiliation at the hands of foreign powers and resentment at the higher living standards of foreigners (Sautman 1994, 424; Fogel 1977). When African students were interviewed during the racist events in Nanjing, they surmised that the Chinese (men) were jealous of Africans, who leveraged their greater wealth to attract Chinese women. Conversely, Chinese men felt that Chinese womanhood needed to be protected from “corruption” by Africans (Sautman 1994). Ethno-racial antagonisms arose in part from Chinese students feeling like second-class citizens in their own country. These events both memorialize the turbulent histories and subvert the hegemonic discourse of Sino-African friendship in China.

Although Africans in Guangzhou come from diverse backgrounds, including different nationalities, social classes, religions, educational experiences, and migration statuses, they are often collectively stereotyped as *heiren/heigui* (meaning Black people/Black devils) in local communities. This inscription shapes these Africans’ collective encounters with anti-Black prejudice, discrimination, and racism at institutional (Castillo 2014; Haugen 2012; Lyons, Brown, and Zhigang 2012) and societal levels (Lan 2015; Li, Ma, and Xue 2009; Mathews, Lin, and Yang 2017). Africans thus navigate a network of racialized governance, including draconian laws, policies, and regulations that frequently change to become more restrictive against them (i.e. visa policies) and continuous racial profiling by public security officers (Huang 2019).

Targeting Africans in Guangzhou through a repressive state apparatus

Securing a visa to live and work in China has become increasingly difficult, as evidenced by the decreasing number of documented residents from African countries over the last decade. According to recent scholarship (Liang and Le Billon 2018; Huang 2019) and figures from the Public Security Bureau of Guangzhou, the population of Africans in Guangzhou has declined from approximately 20,000 in the early 2010s to 16,000 and 13,100 in 2014 and 2018, respectively.

Increasingly stringent immigration laws and regulations have been launched by The Standing Committee of the Eleventh National People's Congress (2012) and The State Council of the People's Republic of China (2013). These introduce higher fines for "illegal activities" of foreigners whilst barring foreign spouses of Chinese citizens from the right to work legally in China (Bork-Hüffer and Yuan-Ihle 2014). Unlike many host societies of international marriages, foreign partners in China are not granted legal working rights upon marrying a Chinese citizen. To operate a trade business, the Chinese wives—rather than their African husbands—would need to apply for a license, rent a shop, and officially run the businesses. In those cases, Africans might only assist in managing the business under the table. Africans with spousal visas face the threat of deportation if they are found working or doing business in China without the legal right to do so.

Heavy policing goes hand-in-hand with the stringent immigration management in Guangzhou. In areas where African traders are concentrated, police implement frequent visa spot-checks to crack down on *sanfei* (a term that includes three main categories of illegal activities: illegal entry, illegal stay, and illegal work). Unable to secure or renew a visa, many Africans in Guangzhou find themselves entrapped in a second state of immobility (Haugen 2012)—becoming undocumented whilst facing several barriers to wealth accumulation. To survive, some of them have been pushed to engage in activities deemed criminal, such as those involving drugs and narcotics.

In the face of multiple manifestations of racism targeting Africans in Guangzhou, we explore how Afro-Chinese couples negotiate the complex dynamics of anti-African/anti-Black xeno-racism in the interethnic domestic and social spheres. The following findings are drawn from research involving reflective observational fieldwork and qualitative interviews to provide a contemporary analysis of racism in intimate family life, foregrounding in particular the standpoint of the Chinese spouse. This paper is based on data collected through in-depth interviews with 18 members of Afro-Chinese couples (11 of whom are women) and participant observations in Guangzhou from 2015 to 2018. Most of the African husbands are from Nigeria, with some from other African countries (the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea). More than half of the Chinese wives are internal migrants, most of whom had not obtained local Guangzhou *hukou* (family registration system) status during the time that fieldwork was conducted. The first author conducted the fieldwork and wrote the paper with the second author. The third author participated in the analytical discussion and revisions.

Findings: negotiating racism and discrimination affecting Afro-Chinese intermarriages

Almost all the African and Chinese informants reported simultaneous experiences of xenophobia, racially motivated verbal abuse, and discrimination targeting African partners and their children of mixed-race heritage (Jordan et al. 2021). Afro-Chinese couples were aware of how the media and the general public negatively perceived them, including differential (unfavorable) treatment. Many Africans described being charged higher rent than Chinese people when looking for an apartment

in the *chengzhongcun*, which are urban villages where many African migrants live for their convenience and affordability. They reported taxi drivers intentionally taking detours and extending travels route to increase taxi fares. Ellen, one of our research informants, expressed rather exasperatedly that “everyone [else] profits from our disadvantage.”

The Chinese wives and African husbands (including their children) often experienced denigration, too. In one instance, a couple’s daughter was called a *zazhong* (bastard child) by a passerby. In another instance, people sitting on opposite seats of the subway train would stare at the couple’s children. Some would even touch or grasp at the children’s hair, professing curiosities about their *mao* (Chinese word for animal fur). One mother described such experiences “as if someone punched you in your face.” Another father claimed that it was a daily occurrence that he would be called a *heigui* (black devil) and that his children would be bullied at school for being dark-skinned. These accounts reflect semblances of the self-conscious “nausea” and racialized corporeal schema as described by Fanon (1986), albeit inter-ethnically and intergenerationally shared as a collective family experience.

Racism affects not only the Chinese wives through their observations of discrimination and indignities directed at their African partners and children. It also manifests as a follow-up accusation by people when they question the Chinese wives for supposedly making the “wrong choice” in marrying African men. For example, a Chinese informant reported that she was accosted publicly and challenged to answer why she would marry a Black man since they were purportedly “poor and dirty.” An African informant shared with us how, when he and his wife went to register their marriage, the government officer asked his wife, “Why would you marry a Black man?” In another instance, someone directly asked one of our Chinese informants if she married her husband because he “is good in bed.” Chinese wives’ personal choices were constantly questioned. As one Chinese informant explained, “people would automatically respond with one of two reactions: [either they would think] I did it for his money, or they would pity me because *heigui* (black devils) are assumed to be *qionggui* (poor devils) and unhygienic.”

From deceived to deceivable: racialized and gendered subjections

For many of the Chinese wives, the benevolent care of their families is communicated in expressions akin to “don’t get fooled” or “don’t marry too far away,” cloaked in racism that can be either implicit or explicit. In these cases, the wife is passively positioned by her family as affected (deceived) but is also considered fatefully and deservingly doomed to deceit (deceivable). The following reconstructed vignette is based on field notes of experiences that occurred across four days in late September of 2018, written by the first author Wei Wang. It illustrates the story of Ellen (one of our informants), who experienced racism with her family. Here, racism is not targeted directly at Ellen’s husband, nor even expressed implicitly as a form of indirect discrimination. Rather, it becomes a condition of possibility that produces a series of experiences, what we later describe as the multiple entanglements of repressive and ideological state apparatuses.

I met Ellen in 2016. During the three years of our acquaintance, I witnessed the highs and lows of her family life. Her Nigerian husband was deported, so they threw a wedding in Nigeria when she went to visit him. However, their relationship was fragile and often on the verge of collapse. In August 2018, Ellen contacted me whilst I was living in Hong Kong. It was the first time she initiated a conversation. We often promised during the field research that there would be reciprocity between the researchers and informants, and this time she needed my help.

Hitherto, the images she presented through her social media showed she was happily married and running her business diligently. But Ellen told me that—because of the long-distance relationship that she

and her husband were forced into after his deportation—the couple started to have disagreements and suspicions towards each other. She was also facing a financial conundrum.

She realized that in her Hong Kong bank account, there were uncollected payments from three years earlier. As I was in Hong Kong, she wanted me to accompany her to the bank, as she had come all the way from Guangzhou. I agreed, but the process did not go smoothly. Ellen first discovered that she could not withdraw cash from the ATM. She went to the bank counter, and the clerk told her she needed to return to the bank one week later. A week later, I received a phone call at midnight from a private number. I thought this was a telephone scam. But later, when they called again, I picked up and discovered it was Ellen speaking. She had been arrested at the bank earlier in the day and taken to a local police station. She requested \$100,000 HKD from me to bail her out. I went directly to the police station to discern whether all of this was true.

Ethically, I could not simply give her that amount of money for bail. Instead, I offered to help contact her family members. I called her younger sister, who lives in Shenzhen. It was nearly 2:00 am, but her sister sounded very calm when she heard the bad news. Maybe she also thought my phone call to her was a scam. I urged her to come to the police station in person. Perhaps then, she would find out that Ellen was actually detained! A police officer asked me whether a family member would come to deal with the case as promised. Otherwise, Ellen would need to be taken into custody. Although Ellen's family agreed to prepare the bail, they could not cross the border into Hong Kong because their visas were expired. The officer asked me to go to Shenzhen to bring the bail money back to Hong Kong. Ellen's sister contacted me via social media, mentioning her need for my help, especially because the bail option would expire at 10:30 am the next day. The situation was urgent. I needed to help her.

I brought two of my friends to Shenzhen at Luohu Port, situated at the Hong Kong border. The three of us together would meet the personal quota for bringing money across the border (\$5,000 US = \$38,000 HKD). A middle-aged woman who resembled Ellen approached us, accompanied by several strong men. She was Ellen's elder sister. She first cautiously checked my identity before calling the Hong Kong police officer. However, after she checked everything and returned the cell phone, the men who were standing behind her suddenly took the cell phone and arrested my two friends and me. We were all taken to the Luohu Police Station in Shenzhen.

We were locked into two small cells separately. As the purported “head” of this “criminal group,” I was intentionally isolated from my friends. About one and a half hours later, I was asked to go to a room for the interrogation. During the interrogation, the police gradually realized this might have been a wrongful case. I explained the situation and my previous conversation with the other officer. I explained that I did not want to cross the border into Shenzhen but was requested to do so by the family. It would have been easiest had the sister taken a two-hour train ride directly to the police station in Hong Kong from Shenzhen. The police officers seemed surprised, as if they were hearing this information for the first time. I later found out that Ellen's family omitted several critical details when they reported the situation to the police. It became clearer to me that the strategy of luring the “scam gang” (my friends and I) to Shenzhen was not initiated by the police officers but by Ellen's sister and family. The authorities dismissed the case as a mix-up, and we were all released after being detained for four hours.

Once I crossed the border back to Hong Kong from Shenzhen, I contacted the Hong Kong case officer to check on Ellen. The officer said that Ellen had been bailed out at last. I later received a message from Ellen saying that she had crossed the border back to Shenzhen. She was furious about what her family did and was deeply sorry. The messages were sent via voicemail, so I could hear that she was crying: “This is my family! But they are like this. That's why I told you I want to leave this family!” She told me that the Hong Kong police found new evidence that “proved I am innocent.”

Ellen started to feel a sense of abandonment and belittlement from her family of origin since they knew of the financial conflicts between her and her husband. From then on, the family started to ignore all of Ellen's needs, even urgent ones relating to Ellen's daughter. The family members ignored all of her family contributions, accusing her of “only sending money to the African guy” but bringing nothing

to the family. This also somehow justified the siblings thinking that they need not pay back their debts to Ellen. Therefore, when I contacted them, they immediately thought Ellen had been “defrauded.” In a message later sent to me by Ellen’s elder sister, she wrote: “My sister is always too kind and too easily trusts others. We thought she had been defrauded by others again.” Ellen’s sister did not apologize for what she did but simply tried to transfer money to me as a gesture of compensation.

At the time, I was puzzled as to why Ellen’s family seemed so unconcerned about her safety, given that arresting us could have placed Ellen in danger. Her family didn’t reach Ellen for two days, even though they probably knew she went to Hong Kong, as one of her younger brothers worked with her. In retrospect, I realize that Ellen’s family must have assumed that she cooperated with us as her “partners in crime.” It was as if they thought we had set up a con to take money from her family, just like the media reports Chinese women “smuggling drugs” for their African partners.

Vicarious racialization as interpellation into anti-African/anti-black racism

In the following, we provide an analysis of how Ellen’s experience is produced by the intersections of gender and racialization, drawing upon Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation. We introduce the construct of “vicarious racialization” as an intimate affliction, meaning an injurious processes by which Chinese women become interpellated but also resist anti-Black racism in their intimate family lives.

From a structuralist perspective, racism operates as an unconscious structure that affects and delimits human action. Althusser’s structuralism emphasizes the relationships among persons and institutions to understand the dynamics of history and modes of production (Schroeder 2004). This critical event involving Ellen and Wei Wang (first author) illustrates the convergence of both repressive and ideological state apparatuses.

Althusser advanced the concept of state apparatus in Marxist theory by categorizing state apparatuses into two distinct types: the repressive state apparatus (RSA) and the ideological state apparatus (ISA). The RSA consists of the administration system, the army, the jurisdiction, the police, and so on, while the latter refers to institutions across religion, education, family, trade, communication, and culture. RSAs dominate individuals’ lives via violence and coercion, whilst ISAs dominate through the ruling ideologies that contribute to reproducing relations of the mode of production. Ellen’s case highlights how the previous deportation of her Nigerian husband through the RSA was compounded by her family operating as one arm of the ISA. Dominant ideologies (anti-African/anti-Black racism, in this case) create subjects through networks of rituals that call or “hail” individuals to enact/identify with said rituals and to function as “well-oiled machines” (Schroeder 2004). In Ellen’s case, rituals include dutifully marrying into a higher social stratum, prospering financially, and *not* having married an African man. Amongst our other Chinese informants, too, communications and the culture industry (*qua* different forms of media) played a powerful ideological role in perpetuating anti-Black/anti-African racism.

Dominant ideologies interpellate individuals as subjects. In Ellen’s story, interpellation surfaces through her sister’s utterance, “We thought she was defrauded by others again.” The *recognition* of—and arguably, *resistance to*—this hailing was expressed when Ellen said: “This is my family! But they are like this.” Although Ellen felt frustrated, betrayed, and disappointed about her family’s behavior and the subject position into which she was called upon or “hailed,” she did not disagree that she was the untrustworthy, deceivable woman they called into being through their “hailing.”

According to Althusser, the Chinese wives would—as ideologically dominated subjects—relinquish resistance and therefore consent to their subjection by becoming good performers who internalize the dominant racist ideology. Our field research interviews illuminated how this process has

been underway with some of the informants, including Ellen herself. Before the aforementioned incident, during the last interview with Ellen, the way she described her husband changed and became unfamiliar. The man whom she once described as romantic, caring, and someone who provided her a sense of self-worth was later described as a “liar” and a “fraud.” She came to regret her choice of marriage, not only for marrying this particular man but for marrying an *African man in general*. With conviction, she continuously shared about how other Chinese wives were “fooled” or “abandoned” by their African husbands. Along with describing the unfair treatment from her family of origin, she expressed regret for not listening to her family’s initial advice not to marry her African husband. Another Chinese informant who participated in this research specifically mentioned that she accepted our interview invitation in order to “warn” other Chinese women “not to make the same kind of mistake [she] did.”

Objections to interpellation?

Ellen’s situation prompts reflection upon whether there is an enduring possibility that individuals object to the “hailing” and resist interpellation, but Althusser fails to offer an account of this. Althusser (2006) does, however, describe two situations whereby “hailed” individuals may not respond to the ideologically dominant “call,” acting differently from what the “call” demands.

The first situation is “misrecognition,” whereby the “hailed” may not react (even if only temporarily not reacting) to the interpellation. Eventually, recognition overrides this misrecognition as the “call” becomes more apparent. For the second situation, Althusser (2006) argues that an individual “does something else, which, still as a function of the same ideological scheme, implies that he/[she] has other ideas in his/[her] head as well as those he/[she] proclaims and that he/[she] acts according to these other ideas” (82). Interpellation is, nevertheless, irresistible, as he claims “individuals are always-already subjects” (Althusser 2006, 87). In other words, Althusser’s structuralism dismisses the self-conscious experience of individuals and does not think it is possible to resist interpellation.

However, Judith Butler (1995) proposes an alternative scenario to Althusser’s. As she claims, the recognition “is determined both by the law and the addressee, but by neither unilaterally or exhaustively” (7). The literal and figurative “turning around” to the hailing depends on the authority of the law and the readiness of the addressee. A subject is not born to act according to a set of rules. He/she must undergo a process of getting ready for submission to the rules and then be later “hailed” as a subject. Butler points out that, in order to emphasize the power of ideological interpellation, Althusser lends help from a religious metaphor that the social recognition is a ritual performance in which subjectivation is “spontaneous” and “natural.” Under this analysis, the voice of the police—the representative of state authority—implies the voice of God. However, Butler reminds us that even God’s naming “cannot be accomplished without a certain readiness or anticipatory desire on the part of the one addressed” (10). Citing Dolar (1993), Butler articulates that there is a consenting subject *prior to* an otherwise “senseless ritual.” As such, there is always a process in between a not-yet-consenting subject and a consenting one. The subject that Althusser takes for granted is only the *consequence* of the process of subjectivation. Furthermore, by considering the process of subject formation, ideological interpellation does not occur “spontaneously” or “naturally” as Althusser assumes.

Butler’s argumentation resonates with why this paper does not exclusively employ the historical construction of racial concepts in contemporary China to explain the Chinese wives’ experiences of racialized interpellation. In Guangzhou, Africans are disproportionately represented as *sanfei* by

state portrayals (Huang 2019; Hood 2013) that connect them to criminality, violence, drug use, impoverishment, and HIV/AIDS, as showed in different local media.¹

This can be regarded as a process of subject formation whereby the operations of RSAs—through violence—creates moral panic in response to a racialized “black threat” discourse (Lan 2019). Ellen’s painful recounting of her husband being arrested in the shopping mall by a plain-clothes policeman shows how this racial ideology was produced in the first place, criminalizing Africans and fueling the “black threat” discourse:

My husband normally would not dare to show up around our shop because he is a [visa] overstayer. The day before he was arrested, an African client came to order 200 pairs of shoes. It was a big order for us ... [My husband] was caught at the exit of the shopping mall by the plainclothes police officers. I held my husband’s clothes and begged them not to take him away. But I knew it was useless. My daughter was just there. She saw her dad was taken away. She was scared and crying. My husband had our bag. Milk powder, diapers, and keys were all in the bag. They took them when they arrested my husband. So, we just waited and waited and didn’t eat anything until 9 pm. They still didn’t allow us to see my husband or call him. You know, he has heart conditions. I wanted to send medicine to him, but they didn’t allow it. What if something happens to him? Even now, no police officer has ever contacted me (Interview, April 2016, Ellen’s shop).

The combination of Guangzhou’s stringent immigration policies—which forced Ellen’s husband into the illegalized status of overstaying in the first place—and the public execution of violence prepared a society-wide racial ideology that proliferates via media and the Internet. However, according to Butler’s critique, instead of “individuals [being] always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects” (Althusser 2006, 86–87), there is the possibility for Chinese wives to resist being fully subjectivized. By triangulating the experiences of other interethnic couples, we provide empirical evidence of how ideological interpellation can be objected to by the presumed-powerless individuals.

Nancy and Joe are another Afro-Chinese couple we met during the fieldwork in Guangzhou. They met in a northern Chinese city at a university where they both studied. They are now running a consultancy company in Guangzhou that brokers for a few multinational corporations. They and their two children live in an apartment in Guangzhou, which they bought five years ago. Their children attend one of the costliest international schools in the city. Talking about the first time Nancy informed her parents about their relationship, the couple recalled the strong backlash. They described Nancy’s father’s reaction:

“You have to stop this relationship immediately! You don’t even know the guy, his background, or where he’s coming from. And usually, Africans, those people don’t treat women well. Where they are living, they don’t wear clothes ...” She told her father, “I’ve stayed with this guy for almost three years. It’s him or nobody else. If you don’t accept him, then I’ll run away from you all.” Her father was speechless and gave the phone to her mum. (Interview, Joe, an African husband, August 2016, a restaurant)

My mum told me, “If you really want to stay together with him, then OK!” I was in my senior year. She said, “I won’t pay your tuition fee for your last year. You have to depend on yourself.” That pushed me to fend for myself. My husband and I came to Guangzhou during the summer holiday and really earned some money. Then I went back and told my mum, “I don’t need your money. We have dealt with it!” (laughs). She kind of felt there was nothing else she could do and finally gave up. (Interview, Nancy, a Chinese wife, August 2016, a restaurant)

Rather than “consenting to subjection” through the interpellation of the family ISA (i.e. “I won’t pay your tuition fee for your last year. You have to depend on yourself”), Nancy chose to object. It was not easy for her as a college student to find a part-time job to make tuition fee payments.

Upon arriving in Guangzhou, they relied heavily on Joe's aunt's business network. As a young couple, they did what most Afro-Chinese couples are still doing today: running small businesses and eventually earning their "first pot of gold" in the city. After Nancy paid her tuition fee and demonstrated her financial independence from her family, her parents finally acknowledged her tenacity and determination. They gave up standing in the way of Nancy and Joe's love.

Florence's objection to interpellation was less contentious than Nancy's, but still was one of devotion. She is an internal migrant from Heilongjiang Province who married a businessman from Côte d'Ivoire. Several years ago, their garment factory failed during the global financial crisis. The family's living cost, including two children's tuition fees for a private international school, is now solely supported by their wholesale garment shop in *Guangyuanxi* (a business district in Guangzhou where African traders concentrate). Although their family finances were under pressure, she and the wife of a Muslim Guinean saved enough money to rent a four-square-meter room in the shopping mall as a prayer chapel. As the closest *Xianxian* Mosque was at least three kilometers away, it would have been inconvenient for their husbands to attend to religious needs whilst going back and forth to the mosque five times per day, especially during Ramadan. Fully aware of the importance of faith for their husbands—and the pervasive effects of racism and islamophobia in their community—these two women made great efforts to secure, decorate, and protect the chapel. The chapel was designed as if it were a shop. There was a window wall on the side of the corridor, which they completely covered with packaging tape. Florence explained: "Even the shopping mall managers haven't said anything yet. We must be careful. I don't want the people from outside to see what happens here. You know, a lot of people think about terrorists when they see Muslims. We have to be careful." She explained that protecting her husband's religious practice was an important responsibility: "As an African's wife, you have to be in the kitchen and the hall," alluding to the importance of handling well both formal and informal issues, inside and outside the family.

Despite the racist hierarchy where African men have often been deemed a traditionally unacceptable option, many of the Chinese wives mentioned intimacy and the charm of exoticness and/or novelty of modernity that attracted them to their African partners. The words "caring," "responsible," and "reliable" were the main words these women mentioned when asked about how they chose their husbands. With such spousal solidarity, the interpellation of racial ideology, if not entirely eliminated, is diffused. Family and love override the interpellation from different ISAs (the family ISA in Nancy's case, and the communication and cultural ISAs in Florence's case).

Vicarious racialization as intimate affliction

In Guangzhou, interactions between Chinese and Africans occur in various contexts. As one of the Chinese shop owners in *Guangyuanxi* pointed out, many Chinese—from traders to restaurant owners, taxi drivers, and porters—all rely upon the inflow of Africans to the city, which reliance some have described as mutually beneficial solidarity (Castillo 2014). However, intimate family life, where love and intimacy play a more salient and constitutive role, is qualitatively different than these predominantly instrumental relationalities. The intersections of gender and migration status alongside racialized and classed subjections of Afro-Chinese couples situate the production of their collective experiences with anti-Black/anti-African racism as intimate afflictions.

In our analysis of the conditions of racialization, we have highlighted the intersection of highly restrictive immigration laws and policies—which change "frequently for the worse" (Huang 2019, 173). Their local implementation, mass/social media propagating "Black threat" moral panics, and

even family members act as key elements of the disciplinary apparatus. While Lan (2015) argues that family disapproval is minor compared to the stringent immigration policies of the local state, we argue from an Althusserian perspective that state power and family governance are intimately connected as both repressive and ideological state apparatuses.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that Chinese wives in relationships with African husbands are *directly targeted* by racial discrimination, for they are generally considered “Han Chinese”—as members of the ethno-racial majority. They are also not *mere observers* of racial discrimination, for they experience ethical and ontological proximity to this anti-Black/anti-African racism that negatively affects their lives as wives and mothers (Jordan et al. 2021). The incident involving Ellen serves as an example to demonstrate the ideological interpellation that operates through the family ISA. At first glance, Ellen’s situation does not appear to be about racism or racial discrimination. As a member of the Han Chinese ethnic majority, she was not directly targeted by racism. However, this does not mean that “race” and racism have no place in the production of her experience. We suggest that Ellen’s sister mentioning how Ellen only sends “money to the African guy,” combined with the presumption that she was “defrauded,” highlights how the subjectivity of Chinese women in relationships with African partners is formed via processes of vicarious racialization. This process maps onto her the racist narratives of deviance, immorality, and criminality that are reflected in media reports describing “Chinese women participat[ing] in drug dealing with their African lovers”.²

Most of our Chinese informants are rural-to-urban migrant women. In the larger social context of urban migration and settlement, many of these women left the countryside to escape the patriarchal control/surveillance of their families and communities to live more liberated lives (Pun 2005). In a context where patriarchal discourses promote gender inequality by labeling women who have never married or are divorced as “left-over” (*shengnu*) (Zurndorfer 2018), these women nevertheless reshape their gender identities and positions within rigid state and family structures from “rustic peasants” to “modern girls” (Gaetano 2008). However, these migrant women who newly inhabit the major urban centers (i.e. Guangzhou) have been subjectivized by the labor and cultural industries in public discourse as the “source of crime and immorality” (Zhang 2014). For some, this includes the contested identity of “*dagongmei*” or “maiden workers,” which can construct women as those who are docile, transient, and ignorant, but who also risk becoming “too independent” and “too modern” when they transgress patriarchal moral codes set for women (Lee 1998).

These migrant women who become married may never quite escape the stigma, stereotyping, and sexist construction of their identities as women who are undesirable, “low quality” (*di suzhi*), and unable to think for themselves—either as victims of crimes or as offenders deserving of discipline and punishment (Sun 2004). In the context of Afro-Chinese marriages, this is compounded by racist rhetoric where the terms “‘Africa’ or ‘Black [people]’ are signifiers of negative things such as chaos, crime, drugs, backwardness, disease, and poverty, all of which are seen as the antitheses of modernity” (Huang 2019, 192). However, in deciding to date and sometimes marry an African man, these women resist patriarchy by challenging or “going against” the wishes of their families of origin, renegotiating the norms of filial piety and taking back responsibility for their *own families*. This means less emphasis on upholding the tradition of obedience to elders and more on cultivating emotional bonds that can be truly reciprocal (Ho et al. 2018).

Conclusion

Although anti-Black racism in China was often denied throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, this denial is no longer tenable. Africans in Guangzhou continue to be marginalized,

discriminated against, and oppressed while trying to forge livelihoods in Guangzhou, and these struggles have only intensified during the current COVID-19 pandemic. The *South China Morning Post* have reported on May 2, 2020 about state and societal expulsions of Africans from restaurants, forced quarantines, and sudden evictions from their homes, leaving many individuals and families homeless.

Despite the official state rhetoric of Sino-African friendship and solidarity throughout history, and despite the contemporary moment of social and economic development, our analysis reveals the multiple grassroots events—the multiple breaches of self-evidence (Foucault 1991)—where anti-African/anti-Black xeno-racism manifests in everyday life. Such events subvert the hegemonic discourse of Sino-African friendship (Lan 2019). As we have shown, racism is not merely a form of discrimination but a mode of governance through both repressive and ideological state apparatuses and the process of interpellation. Our analysis echoes Stoler’s assertion (1995) that “racism does not merely arise in moments of crisis, in sporadic cleansings. It is internal to the biopolitical state, woven into the weft of the social body, threaded through its fabric” (69).

This paper addresses a theoretical research gap in the literature about how racialization intertwines with and affects the intimate lives of Afro-Chinese couples. Specifically, it examines how intersecting processes of anti-Black racism and patriarchy through overlapping migration regimes produce a series of racialized experiences among Chinese wives in Afro-Chinese marriages. We conceptualize “vicarious racialization” to understand how racism emerges alongside patriarchal discourses that cast structural delimitations on women (particularly rural-to-urban migrant women) in China regarding their responsibilities and choices. However, the all-encompassing mode of racist ideologies does overlook important forms of resistance, not just by Africans themselves but their Chinese partners. Through our fieldwork, we show examples of families who are quite different than Ellen’s, where the family-kinship network offered buffers from and ally-ship against the pernicious effects of racism.

We particularly highlighted the Chinese spouse’s agency and her role as a wife in the Afro-Chinese couples, as her encounters with racism may be easily overlooked because she herself is a member of the ethno-racial majority. She herself can become interpellated into the larger discourse of anti-Black racism by virtue of being in relation with her husband. However, this vicarious racialization that she is subjected to is also one that she can actively resist through her personal responses.

Limitations

As a paper focused on racial interpellation of the family ISA, our analysis has foregrounded the Chinese wives’ accounts rather than those of their parents or other family members who are typically against their marriages. We did not interview their parents nor other family members, as most of the Chinese wives were internal migrants whose extended families did not live in Guangzhou. In many instances, there were strained relationships between the Chinese wives and their parents, which made it difficult for us to suggest reaching out to their family members. Nevertheless, it would be fruitful for future research to engage in greater depth with the perspectives of couples’ family members and consolidate a greater understanding of racialization in interracial intimate family life.

Notes

1. Di, Cong. 2012. “A foreigner suddenly dead in the police station in Guangzhou.” June 20. <http://news.66wz.com/system/2012/06/20/103225710.shtml>.

2. Fu, Meibin. 2014. "Chinese women participate in drug dealing with their African lovers." June 26. <http://www.chinanews.com/fz/2014/06-26/6322984.shtml>.

Special terms

black people

黑人

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