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**“Golden rice bowl of racial discrimination” –
racialization of black Africans in Chinese online
discussion**

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This thesis sets out to examine race in China through tracing the details of how black Africans were discussed in April 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, when reports of confirmed cases of COVID-19 originating from abroad began to outnumber domestic cases which followed news reports of black Africans in the Southern Chinese city of Guangzhou facing targeted, indiscriminate pandemic measures as racialized black people.

Informed by critical race approaches, this study conceptualizes race as a socially constructed tool of domination which is reproduced in discourse. The online representations of black Africans are then analyzed through primary research using the method of qualitative thematic analysis to uncover race-related themes in online discussion on the China-based social media and question-and-answer platform Zhihu (知乎).

A thematically diverse, yet consistently othering portrayal of black Africans in Chinese online discussion is found. Netizens represent black Africans as social deviants, *essentially different* to Chinese people based on legal status/mobility patterns, behavior, and attitudes, as well as *politicized subjects* who, in Chinese netizens' imaginaries, serve as conduits for broader political themes, both domestically within the PRC and in the international arena. Chinese netizens furthermore engaged in *meta-discourse on racism*, in which it is overwhelmingly argued that black Africans do not face discrimination in China. In line with earlier literature on the topic, the themes suggest a paradoxical view of black Africans as simultaneously inferior and superior.

Key words: race, racialization, racism, racial discrimination, anti-blackness, social media, China.

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1 Introduction

“A single spark can start a prairie fire”, China Daily wrote quoting chairman Mao Zedong in late March of 2020 in reference to an early observation of imported cases of COVID-19 (China Daily 2020). During this time, China had successfully suppressed the number of domestic infections with months of forceful measures in line with its zero-covid policy of the time. By early April, worries of imported cases reintroducing the virus seemingly started to materialize: the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 originating from abroad began to outnumber domestic cases. For China, it was this second wave of COVID-19 that came from abroad.

Soon, Western news outlets reported on targeted measures against black African residents in the Southern Chinese city of Guangzhou: forced quarantines and tests, refusals to serve black people, and evictions of African residents from hotels and apartment buildings (Marsh et al. 2020). An alert issued by the US consulate in Guangzhou warned African Americans of travelling to the city and said that the mandatory measures applied to anyone with “African contacts, regardless of recent travel history or previous quarantine completion”, and that police had ordered bars and restaurants not to serve clients appearing to be of African origin (ibid.). One widely publicized incident entailed a Guangzhou McDonald’s employee who was recorded demanding black customers to leave while holding a printout note stating the restaurant will not serve “black people”, citing public health reasons (Vincent 2020). A diplomatic reaction ensued. Many ambassadors of African countries reacted with demands to end the forceful testing, quarantine and other “inhumane treatment” against Africans; Nigeria, Kenya and Ghana summoned their diplomats as protest. Additionally, Nigeria organized evacuation flights from Guangzhou. (Marsh et al. 2020)

These incidents of apparent racial discrimination point to tensions between the Chinese and Africans residing in the Guangzhou, although the official Chinese response denied any claims of measures based on race as groundless. Echoing Mao-era declarations of aligned interests and solidarity between Africa and China, the local government of Guangdong province declared that “China and Africa are good brothers, good friends, and good partners”, and that “the friendship between China and Africa is deeply rooted in Guangdong and is unbreakable” (People’s Government of Guangdong Province 2020b). Even Foreign Minister Wang Yi made a statement which denied accusations of discrimination and proclaimed that the “traditional” Sino-African friendship “remains rock-solid and unbreakable” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of

the People's Republic of China 2020). A week later, the local government furthermore published a “zero tolerance” announcement related to discrimination and ten regulations on equal treatment to foreigners in the context of the pandemic (Qiu 2021).

Despite Chinese authorities exerting strict control over the internet, online discussions do leave room for civic engagement and hence they may act as a valid entry point to study sociopolitical trends in China (Peng 2020). This is especially true for race, as contents related to it are not deemed overly dissident and are often overlooked by censors (Pfafman et al. 2015, 541). In fact, in 2023, the international human rights organization Human Rights Watch called for China to combat online racism against black people in China, referring to a surge of anti-black content on Chinese social media and the seeming unwillingness or inability of Chinese authorities and major online platforms to address the problem. (Human Rights Watch 2023)

The surge of anti-black racism took place during a year when many global stories directly involved race and racism: the COVID-19 pandemic itself being branded as a “Chinese virus” by none other than U.S. president Donald Trump, as well as the global wave of Black Lives Matter protests in June 2020 sparked by the murder of George Floyd. In this context of heightened attention on racial othering, understanding the specificities of race and racism in China is not only important for understanding contemporary sociopolitical trends in China and but also to add to knowledge about contemporary manifestations of race and racism in non-Western contexts.

While studies focusing on the racialization of black Africans in China (for example, Gu & Ho 2023, Liu et al. 2021, Pfafman et al. 2015, Cheng 2011, Shen 2009) have confirmed that race-related topics are indeed discussed widely on Chinese social media platforms and racist stereotypes are deployed against Africans in China, there is further need for empirically backed analyses of race and racism (Visser & Cezne 2023, 15). Studies have furthermore been methodologically fraught (Castillo 2020) and lacking analyses of Chinese language data retrieved from relevant, widely popular social media websites (Liu et al. 2021). Furthermore, the racialization of black Africans during the events described above has been analyzed based on secondary sources (Visser & Cezne 2023, Castillo 2021a, Qiu 2021) and noted as a critical juncture in Sino-African relations (Castillo & Amoah 2020), but few have conducted primary, empirical research on the topic. Liu et al. (2021) examine the intersections of anti-black sentiments with gender, homophobia, and COVID-19 misinformation, whereas Lan et al.

(2022) and Ang and Martin (2024) explore racialization of white Westerners during the pandemic. Supplementing and building on these studies, this thesis examines the racialization of black Africans in this context. The aim of this thesis is to gain entry to larger discussions of race in China through tracing the details of how black Africans were discussed during these events. The research question of the present study is: How do representations of black Africans in online discussion on COVID-19 cases among Africans in Guangzhou engage with race and racism?

To address this question, this research project carries out primary research through the method of qualitative thematic analysis to uncover race-related themes in an online discussion thread on the China-based social media and question-and-answer platform Zhihu (知乎). In chapter 2, I present societal and historical context which is essential to contextualizing the discussions of race in China. This chapter includes a brief overview on the historical development of the concept of race in China and specifically in the context of perceptions of black people, as well as a general introduction on the African presence in Guangzhou and the controlled online sphere in China. Chapter 3 presents the theoretical framework of this study and places it within discussions of race and racism and their applications to non-Western contexts. Chapter 4 presents the research design and methodology of the study through discussing thematic analysis. Finally, chapter 5 presents the analysis and 6 the findings and conclusion of this study.

Throughout this thesis project, I choose to primarily refer to *black Africans* (rather than for example “black people” or “Africans”). Generally, the Mandarin Chinese word 黑人 (*hēirén*) meaning literally “black people” is in daily use conflated with the category of Africans (Zhang 2024). This observation is compounded by Castillo (2021a) who notes that the term “Africans” in the context of Guangzhou usually refers to black Africans generally of sub-Saharan origin not only in the Chinese perception but also among African nationals themselves. North Africans with lighter skin are usually left out of the category of African (ibid.; Lan 2016, 305). Furthermore, in the context of this study, the term black African explicitly guides attention to the racialization of the group rather than leaving it implicit. I have retained other terms when they appear in either direct translations from data or from existing academic literature, where different terms are used based on valid criteria, for example, surveys that have been conducted on all nationals of African countries regardless of racial identity. In a similar vein, some contemporary scholars have opted for using quotation

marks around the word race to emphasize its imagined nature and to avoid reifying race and thus racism. I hope that my disclaiming of racism comes across throughout the study, even as I do not adopt this convention for the research project at hand.

2 Historical and social context

As further discussed in the chapter on the theoretical framework of this study, the concept of race as a social construct entails much that is context-bound – the *social* part of the social construct, one could say. This is why it is informative for this study to review earlier findings on the development of the concept of race and the specific meanings attached to race and specifically racialized black people in the context of China. This chapter aims to contextualize the events of April 2020 and the apparent anti-black sentiments visible in them.

As a general note, current PRC policy does not explicitly recognize the diversity of races in China and instead refers to 56 official *ethnic groups* (民族), which were constructed in the Ethnic Classification Project of the early years of the PRC. According to census data, roughly 91 percent of the population in China is counted as Han Chinese (汉族, 汉民族 or 汉人). (National Bureau of Statistics 2021) The general complexities regarding the social constructs of ethnicity and race as well as the ambiguity of Han Chinese as a category and its relationship to race is discussed in the theoretical framework of this study.

First, to contextualize the general flows of thought on race that have formed in and passed through the area now known as the People’s Republic of China, I discuss the development of the black racialized other in China by tracing its history. A dark-skinned racial “other” predates the modern Chinese states and the continuing relevance of this “other” may be found in the racialized term *sanfei*, which questions the legality of black Africans in China. Second, to contextualize specifically the settings in which this thesis project explores racialization, I provide a brief literature review on Africans in Guangzhou. Although the representations ostensibly linked to black Africans do not in fact *describe* them, contextual information is in place to critically evaluate these imaginaries. The presence of black Africans in the Pearl River Delta area has a long history, which has recently been problematized as an “immigration” problem. Finally, the section takes a brief look at the online sphere which this research project operates in. In the PRC, this sphere is subject to strict controls via numerous mechanisms of censorship, yet anti-black racism is rife.

2.1 The black racialized other in China

In this section, I briefly review literature on how the concept of race has developed in China with a specific focus on the racialization of black Africans. The review starts from pre-modern and early modern ideas of race, since distinct ideas of black people had already taken

root in this time. Following this, the focus shifts to post-revolution years, during which also the effect of Africa-China relations started to mold the conceptualization of a racialized black other. For this reason, the sections after early conceptions are organized according to major policy shifts in China.

Though this section is presented in chronological order, the intent is not to write a comprehensive historical narrative nor even account for all decades and eras even-handedly; the sections are arranged around most relevant developments regarding the concept of race and racism as explored in existing literature on the subject. Likewise, the intention of this focus is not to imply racialization in the Chinese context would exclusively apply to black individuals or black Africans. The choice of focus is guided by the research aim of understanding race and racialization specifically in relation to blackness and black Africans.

2.1.1 Early conceptions

Chinese premodern conceptions of difference marked by physical characteristics may have made Chinese society predisposed to adopt ideas of race. Frank Dikötter's seminal work (1994a, 1994b, 2013) traces the evolution of modern discourse of race in China back to premodern perceptions of skin color and physical features, suggesting that a hierarchically arranged view of physical features was already present before Western imperialism. Of key importance in these conceptions is the early association of dark skin with slavery in China, which has roots already in the Tang dynasty (618–907) and indicates a longstanding perception of darker skin as inferior in Chinese society (Dikötter 1994a, 16–17). Dikötter's broad application of the concept of race to several Chinese words (族, 种, 族类, 民族, 种族, 人种) has been criticized as overlooking the nuanced meanings these terms hold within Chinese context (Dirlik 1993, Zarrow 1993). Dikötter, however, defends his approach by emphasizing the emergence of racial categories beyond the specific use of the term "race," arguing for a broader interpretation of how racial thought evolved in China (Dikötter 1994b).

In a similar vein, Don J. Wyatt (2012, 2013) argues that Chinese ideas of light skin being superior to darker skin developed first endogenously and were applied to outsiders or foreigners only later; these ideas did not, then, come about through early contact with “foreigners”, although conventional wisdom would suggest differentiation based on skin color would emerge only when significant differences are present. Moreover, Confucianism's hierarchical world vision, which divides society into descent groups, predisposed East Asian societies to accept and adopt racist ideologies (Dikötter 1994a, Tikhonov 2012).

However, ideational elements only set the stage for an emerging discourse of race. Dikötter argues that the social institution and cultural discourse of lineage, the late 19th century reformists' quest for national wealth, power, and unity following China's defeat in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–95, and the anti-Manchu nationalism prevalent among revolutionaries in the early 20th century all played a more significant role than premodern dispositions (Dikötter 2013, 355). China's colonial experience, distinct in the sense of "semicolonialism" due to the multiplicity of foreign influences yet limited territorial control, further shaped its engagement with race (Shih 2001, 34).

The introduction of a systematic discourse of race around the turn of the 20th century was significantly influenced by prominent reformers such as Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei, who used racial concepts to forge national unity against foreign domination and the Manchu rule, incorporating Western ideas of race and presenting them as an extension of the imperial institution of patrilineage (Dikötter 2013, 356). During this period, Chinese intellectuals engaged with Darwinist ideas selectively, particularly Spencer's concepts of group survival, to underscore collective strength (Shih 2013, 157). Significantly, the concept of nation extended lineage, which was united by an ancestor, to a shared territory (Dikötter 1994a, 97). Rather than rejecting the supremacy of whites altogether, the Han race was situated in proximity to the perceived superiority of whiteness within eugenic discourses following the 1911 revolution (Shih 2013, 157). The incorporation of China into a global hierarchy of races was presented in Kang Youwei's *One World* (大同书 *dàtóng shū*) in which "yellow" and "white" races act as equals, standing superior to and competing over the control of the "red," "black," and "brown" races (*ibid.*). In this vision, a peaceful one world would be achieved as the yellows and whites would eventually merge and the inferior races either assimilate or disappear. (*ibid.*)

In sum, though a systematic idea of race was introduced to China through Western "race science" starting from the early 20th century, conceptions of both Chinese civilizational superiority versus outside barbarians as well as specifically conceptions of the superiority of fair skin as opposed to dark skin had existed in the area from as early as Tang dynasty. The emergence of a racial discourse in China was profoundly influenced by the nation's political turbulence and encounters with European and Japanese colonial powers. Ideas of race, in which the black racial other played a significant role, developed hand in hand with the establishment of a modern state in and the construction of a Chinese nationalism. The implication here is not that Chinese traditional thought "proves" Chinese racism, but that

certain ideational elements made the acceptance and adoption of racial “sciences” more frictionless. Furthermore, the ways in which premodern dispositions in combination with internal institutional, economic, and political developments contributed to the development of a distinct idea of race points to an emerging dynamic and co-constitutive global racial hierarchy.

2.1.2 Mao-era “racial internationalism”

The communist revolution and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) brought about dramatic change compared to earlier periods. After the founding of the PRC, the established discourse of race in China was officially abolished as differentiation based on class and one’s social origins was emphasized (Dikötter 1994a, 191). At the same time, race became at the same time a pronounced issue of foreign policy. In this regard, the first decades of the People’s Republic, from 1949 until roughly the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 stand out for the position of outreach for Afro-Asian solidarity. Though its proclamation of standing together with the colored peoples against imperialism included also Latin American and Asian countries, China specifically reached out to Africa and people of African descent (Kelley & Esch 1999, 9). Some have called this “color strategy”, as it emphasized a shared experience of racial discrimination (Cheng 2019, 189). China articulated this position in the Asian-African conference of non-aligned countries held in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955, and shortly after, Egypt became the first African country to accept Chinese economic support (Frazier 2015, 29).

Jim Crow laws and anti-black violence in the United States made easy ammunition for foreign countries’ criticism, and China did not refrain from using this opportunity. (Frazier 2015, 30–31). Robeson Taj Frazier (2015) delineates how this racial internationalism included African Americans, too. During this time, China attracted the attention of US black radicals, who in turn reinforced the idea of China as an ally of the non-white peoples. In 1963, Mao issued a statement in support of the civil rights movement:

I call on the workers, peasants, revolutionary intellectuals, enlightened elements of the bourgeoisie and other enlightened persons of all colours in the world, whether white, black, yellow or brown, to unite to oppose the racial discrimination practised by U.S. imperialism and support the American Negroes in their struggle against racial discrimination. --. The evil system of colonialism and imperialism arose and thrived with the enslavement of Negroes and the trade in Negroes, and it will surely come to its end with the complete emancipation of the black people. (Mao 1963)

Prominent black radical figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Huey Newton of the Black Panther party visited China during this time – in 1958, Mao even invited Du Bois to spend Bois' 90th birthday in the People's Republic (Kelley & Esch 1999, 8). Consequently, the PRC and specifically Maoism influenced black radical movements in the US starting from the 1950s and continuing at least to the mid-1970s. (ibid.)

In line with the “spirit of Bandung”, the PRC began offering scholarships to African students from various countries from 1958 onward (Frazier 2015, 100–101), marking the first serious effort to engage Africans in Chinese politics (Cheng 2019, 191). However, African students recounted experiencing recurrent racial discrimination among other difficulties of living in China, some of which was related to interracial relationships and friendships between African men and Chinese women. African students received significantly higher stipends than their Chinese counterparts, which according to some accounts was a cause of tensions between the African and Chinese students (Hevi 1963, 132). Notably, in 1962, Zanzibari expatriates were beaten by a mob at the Beijing Peace Hotel (Frazier 2015, 101). These experiences were “a reality that contrasted with Mao's and the CCP's constant claim that racism was a Western disease that had not taken hold among Chinese people” (ibid.). Citing racism as reason, almost a hundred African students appealed to leave the country which the government initially refused. In response, students staged hunger strikes and public demonstrations, the publicity of which made the government cave in by 1963. (ibid.) Although after these incidents premier Zhou Enlai made an African tour in 1963–1964 emphasizing China's willingness to help African countries with interest-free loans, other foreign policy contradictions with “racial internationalism” appeared: border clashes with India as well as conflict with Taiwan, Tibet, and later Vietnam. (ibid., 112–116)

Nevertheless, PRC endeavors in Africa continued during the 1970s, with the PRC becoming the largest communist provider of aid to Africa in 1971–1976 giving 1.8 billion USD to African countries (Frazier 2015, 202–204). China continued to provide support to select liberation movements and guerrilla armies on the African continent, such as those engaged in resistance against white-minority rule in Namibia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe/Rhodesia. Nevertheless, the distribution of this aid increasingly hinged upon the extent to which these groups demonstrated alignment with China's interests in countering Soviet influence in Africa, departing from previous considerations rooted in anti-imperialist ideals or Third World internationalism. Finally, what was perceived by many as a decisive ideological and geopolitical shift was PRC involvement in Angolan civil war, where it provided support to

FNLA troops, siding with South Africa and the United States. (ibid.) In sum, the “spirit of Bandung” did not outlive Mao. Although cracks and contradictions were visible before his death in 1976, the Sino-African friendship cooled significantly as the 1980s came closer and Deng assumed chairmanship of the PRC. Robeson Taj Frazier (2015, 209) sums up: “The demise of China’s explicit anticapitalist stance marked the beginning of the end of the country’s symbolic claims of antiracist solidarity.”

Scholarly depictions of the Mao era racial politics tend to evaluate its *genuineness*: whether the “color strategy” was just that, a strategy, with which the PRC aimed to combat US and Soviet influence in Africa, rather than any “real” commitment to racial internationalism. Cheng (2019), for example, claims that the speed at which the Third World alliance was “forgotten” after US-China diplomatic relations were established points to the “purely political” nature of the political alliance. In Frazier’s (2015) assessment, the alliance was not limited to discourse at least until the Sino-Soviet split. However, he too points to the limits of China’s camaraderie with African countries: “-- [the PRC] rarely, if ever, inversely depicted African nations in similar terms—that is, as defenders of China and as populations with something important to teach to China.” (ibid., 211) The order of command was clear: the PRC would guide, and the African comrades would follow.

During the Mao era, the Chinese perception of race and the black racial other underwent a multifaceted (r)evolution. Race was proposed as an imperialist ideology and Maoist China situated problems of racism outside China, notably in the United States. At the same time, the PRC positioned itself as a staunch ally of Afro-Asian solidarity, stressing shared experiences of racial discrimination and extending support to African liberation movements and African American civil rights activists. The proclaimed solidarity was compromised as incidents of racial discrimination against African students in China brought underlying tensions to light and geopolitical considerations took precedence over third world solidarity in PRC stances on numerous foreign policy issues.

2.1.3 Reform-era campus racism and racialized imaginaries of AIDS

After Mao’s death, racial internationalism was cast aside and China’s engagement in Africa, in the same vein as China’s reform and opening up policies, went under reform. The 1980s saw China revitalizing its engagements with Africa, with even more students coming to China as well as more aid provided to countries on the continent (Cheng 2019, 196). Concurrently,

explicitly race-related clashes on campuses were starting to occur more frequently: Shanghai in 1979, Nanjing in 1980, and Tianjin in 1986 (Kelley & Esch 1999, 10).

Protests in Nanjing and Beijing in 1989 attracted thousands of students and led to the evacuation of African students and dispatchment of riot police (Cheng 2019, 198). According to Cheng (*ibid.*), the protests were marked by “intense racial hatred” and were connected to an idea of China’s place in world politics. Barry Sautman’s detailed analysis (1994, 436) of the protests likewise notes the connection to international relations, with the loosened Sino-African political bonds in the context of foreign policy reflected in the events: “In essentially excusing the ill-treatment of African students in Nanjing and elsewhere, the Chinese regime signaled a willingness to allow those bonds to fray.” Furthermore, those persecuted on campuses were mostly from a relatively privileged subgroup of Africans; therefore, racist incidents had a “disproportionate” effect on Sino-African relations (*ibid.*, 413).

Whether the motivation behind the incidents was racism was debated through media and scholarly accounts. Many offered non-racial reasons for campus protests: among these, similar to Mao era incidents, were the relatively good benefits provided to African students as opposed to their Chinese counterparts. Some also pointed to demonstrators having borrowed slogans from the “democracy movement” of the time to suggest the demonstrations had an alternative root cause. However, Sautman argues that these explanations overlooked the evident racial prejudices and Africans themselves who pointed to the state's role in diverting discontent towards black Africans. (Sautman 1994, 426–427) Sautman notes that these accounts on the intentions of Chinese students were mostly analyzed based on reports by Western journalists; thus, they are filtered through their perception and reflect their interests (*ibid.*, 429).

According to Cheng (2019, 196), during this time, anti-African racism was strengthened through a perception of Africans as passive recipients of aid, which was not challenged in any meaningful way – African indebtedness to China was taken for granted and any negative influences of PRC activity in Africa was not known to the public (*ibid.*). Sautman paraphrases a poll from 1992 conducted on 461 people, primarily students, which points to a racialized outlook of Africans; they were scored among the lowest compared to other foreigners on things like “culture” (文化) and “intelligence” (聪明). Overall, the view of Africans overlapped with that of Chinese peasants, suggesting a link between a conflation of Africans with peasants. (*ibid.*, 435)

The racialization of HIV/AIDS in China further illustrated ideas linked to blackness and black Africans. Based on archival work starting from materials from the 1980s, when the first case of HIV/AIDS was detected in China, Johanna Hood (2013, 284) finds that in Chinese media narratives, black Africans were typically portrayed as HIV carriers who contracted the virus through uncontrolled sexual or social behavior. Furthermore, this links the virus and the black bodies purportedly carrying it to backwardness (落后) and a lack of quality or *suzhi* (素质). This racialization in turn created a distance between Chinese media consumers and HIV/AIDS carriers by reaffirming the (Han) Chinese as disciplined and healthy (ibid.) The racialization of the affliction underlines the continuing corporeal dimension of race and racism.

The reform-era developments marked a clear departure from the Maoist era, as the period was characterized by intensified racial imaginaries and a restructuring of China's international stance, particularly in its relations with Africa. No longer unified as “colored people” of the world, the friendship narrative notably waned and the black racial other took on new meanings.

2.1.4 21st century: online discussions and *sanfei* immigrants

China-Africa relations became a central tenet of Chinese foreign and economic policy during the 21st century. High-level Forums on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) held since 2000 have signalled that China's relations with African countries are on top of the political agenda as economic exchanges have surged, with China surpassing the United States as Africa's primary trading partner in 2009 (Ighobor 2013). The presence of Chinese nationals in Africa has increased dramatically, with some estimates suggesting a growth from 40,000 in the early 2000s to 1.5 million (Castillo, 2021a). Concurrently, China's relations with Africa have become a case study of a “China threat” for journalists and academics (Huynh and Park 2019, 159).

The social dimensions of these evolving relations are characterized by both bridge-building and division. Park & Huynh (2019) note that deeper interpersonal encounters are starting to erode some stereotypes, fostering more informed views of Africans among the Chinese, a trend evidenced by increased African–Chinese relationships and mixed-race children. Bodo (2010, 2012) has theorized African presence in China as a “bridge”, meaning Africans act as conduits for economic and cultural exchange thus facilitating a mutual comprehension between African and Chinese communities; later, this notion has been challenged as the daily lived experiences of Africans in Guangzhou – with public spaces,

culinary practices, and intimate relations emerging as key sites – often accentuate racial distinctions and reinforce the dominance of Chinese cultural identity (Liang & Le Billon 2020). Such interactions suggest a complex interplay of race and culture and encounters fraught with ambivalence, not automatically leading to positive intercultural exchanges.

The internet has emerged as a key arena in articulating race and racism, even as the PRC has gradually established a distinct Chinese online sphere with significant control over contents of communication, the effects of which are discussed further in chapter 2.3. Shen (2009) highlights a paradox in Chinese perceptions of their engagement with Africa, where Africans are simultaneously seen as inferior partners yet recipients of necessary aid to bolster China's global image. Lan (2016, 305–308) identifies several key themes within negative portrayals of Africans in online discourse in China. These include discussions around Chinese aid to Africa, the stigmatization of black sexuality, and narratives depicting Africans as a threat in Guangzhou. Furthermore, Lan emphasizes the complex and contested nature of online representations of black Africans in China, where they are sometimes conflated with other groups such as foreigners, Muslims, or African Americans. Lan also notes that skin color alone does not dictate perceptions of foreigners in China, as nationality and economic status also play significant roles. Black Africans, perceived to occupy the lowest positions in both the color and economic hierarchies, face compounded discrimination compared to other dark-skinned foreigners in China. Researchers have also noted that online racist rhetoric may serve a “political function”, although research on the topic is so far scarce (Castillo 2020, 317). What is meant by this is that anti-African rhetoric disguises political critique – e.g., complaining of interracial couples, when the “real” dissatisfaction lies within Chinese family planning policies (Pfafman et al. 2015). Research has also pointed to a continued gendered dimension to racist online discourse, mainly in the context of interracial relationships between African immigrants and Chinese women (Cheng 2011).

Recently, anti-black racism in the online environment have largely been analyzed through several widely mediatized “incidents” of apparent Chinese racism (Castillo 2021a, 154). These include Spring Festival gala performers in blackface (Castillo 2021a, Zhang 2018), a laundry detergent advertisement portraying a black man coming out of a washing machine as a fair-skinned Chinese man (Castillo 2021b), and online debate on the identity of a mixed-race performer on Chinese television (Frazier & Zhang 2014). Chinese netizens have gained reputation as supersensitive over and eager to set definite limits on acceptable appearance of people deemed to represent Chineseness; recent mediatized controversies over a Zara model

with freckles (May & Mou 2019), a Dior model with small eyes (BBC 2021), and a picture of an Apple employee (Global Times 2023) are cases in point. Moreover, the issues of race and racism have been intergrated into frames reminiscent of Western “culture wars” frames. Anti-black stereotypes disseminated in Chinese online spaces often align with those prevalent in American culture (Pfafman et al. 2015) and Euro-American right-wing populist rhetoric, with Chinese netizens hating on *baizuo* (白左) or white leftists for among other things, being “too soft” on black and brown immigrants (Zhang 2019).

Furthermore, during the past two decades, the black racial other in China has increasingly taken the form of “illegal immigrant”. This shift is exemplified in the term *sanfei* (三非), which labels foreigners in China as “three illegals”, referring to them supposedly engaging in illegal entry, illegal residence, and illegal employment (Haugen & Huang 2023, 238). This derogatory term not only implies undocumented status but also suggests a security threat and exploitation of China's economic prosperity. In theory applicable to all foreigners, *sanfei* was used earlier in reference to cross-border marriages along the China-Vietnam border (ibid.). Currently, however, it is currently largely used to stigmatize Africans, who have since roughly 2008 increasingly become the target of anti-*sanfei* campaigns (Huang 2020, 175). Consequently, the term “*sanfei* blacks” (三非黑人) has emerged online, highlighting the racial bias ingrained within its usage (ibid.) *Sanfeis* have emerged in an environment increasingly hostile to them, as evident through the institutionalization of migrant management via legal reforms, such as the 2012 Exit and Entry Administration Law of the People's Republic of China (中华人民共和国出境入境管理法), termed the first comprehensive migration law, and the 2018 establishment of the National Migration Agency (国家移民管理局) (Haugen & Huang 2023, 246). These reforms have established *sanfei* as a social threat, delineating the legal boundary between irregular foreigners more distinctly (ibid.). Efforts to combat *sanfei* are encouraged, with citizen participation actively promoted. For instance, in 2021, the Guangzhou municipal public security bureau initiated a reward program to incentivize citizens to report undocumented foreigners to the authorities (ibid., 240–241).

In summary, through tracing this history, it is evident that perceptions of black Africans have experienced major shifts over time. Since the establishment of the PRC, Africa-China ties have been an important backdrop for these imaginaries; throughout the modern history of the PRC a cleavage between official and “unofficial” discourse on race and racism may be

detected. It is furthermore apparent that the geopolitical and economic status of China has affected the depiction of the Chinese racial other, as power dynamics have shifted through great power rivalry during the Cold War years and more recently the “China threat” narrative that has accompanied China’s recentering in the global economy. In a similar vein, the Mao era stands out from other in its orientation toward race: internationalism and reduction of race as a subcategory of class, as well as embracing (at least in foreign policy) a position as a “colored” people. Before and after Mao, it has been an at times radical Chinese nationalism that has been the driving force in situating the Chinese against the black racial other.

From an official standpoint, the existence of a racial other has not been recognized as the salience of race is not recognized as an element in China’s domestic sphere. As such, the historical development of race and racism in China have been studied largely via foreign policy and case studies of high-profile “incidents” in which racism is apparent, which as an approach has apparent limitations for achieving a broader understanding of the issue.

2.2 Black Africans in Guangzhou

Next, I turn my focus to the black Africans residing in Guangzhou, Guangdong province. Importantly, however, this research project does not examine Africans in Guangzhou. The subject of this research project is Chinese constructions of race, in which Africans in Guangzhou act as a signifier of larger meanings attached to the idea of “black Africans” – the mechanisms of which are discussed in more detail in chapter 3. To understand the context of these constructions, however, a general description of these individuals follows.

Africans in Guangzhou have received ample scholarly attention during the past few decades, and the topic has correspondingly developed into a “small but intense” area of research, as described by Ghanaian scholar Adams Bodom, one of the pioneering researchers of Africans in China (Bodom 2020, 528). In fact, most publications regarding African presence in China, an otherwise relatively marginal topic of research, focus on Africans in Guangzhou (*ibid.*) Between only 2014 and 2021, 60 academic works were written on the subject (Castillo 2021a, 5).

Although activities of groups and individuals from African countries in the Pearl River Delta area can be traced much further back in history, the uptick in the number of black Africans started in the 1990s, before which the number of Africans in Guangzhou amounted to “only a handful” (Haugen 2019, 48). During this decade, many Africans traders made their entry to

Guangzhou via Hong Kong, where African nationals from Commonwealth countries could enter without a visa; over time, many started to head directly to Guangzhou (Haugen 2023, 244). The 1997 Asian financial crisis provided a trigger to new groups of Africans to enter mainland China, which provided a lower cost of living, and specifically to Guangdong province known as “the world’s factory”, a production hub of low-cost manufactured goods to buy and resell these goods (Bodomo 2020, 528).

Despite extensive coverage, defining who constitutes an "African in Guangzhou" poses significant methodological challenges to scholars. Castillo (2021a, 8) notes based on his fieldwork that in practice, the term "African in Guangzhou" is conflated both by Chinese and black people alike with *black people of sub-Saharan origin*, which excludes, for example, many North Africans and Middle Easterners, who may be nationals of African countries but identify primarily with identities other than “African”. Scholarly solutions to this problem have varied, with some opting for definition by nationality (for example, Bodomo 2012), and others leaving the definition unclear, acknowledging the conflation but continuing to refer to black Africans of sub-Saharan origin as “Africans” (for example, Visser & Cezne 2023). As mentioned in the introduction, this thesis opts for “black African” both in acknowledgment of this issue, but also due to the research focus on the issues of race and racism, which makes the distinction of black arguably even more significant and warranting explicit spelling out.

Earlier surveys conducted in the 2000s on the national makeup of Africans in Guangzhou found a predominance of West African nationals (Li et al. 2009, 709; Bodomo 2012). However, the range of nationalities present in Guangzhou has since diversified, with especially the number of East African nationals on the rise (Bodomo 2020, 529). Likewise, in the 2000s, surveys found that most African nationals in Guangzhou were relatively young and predominantly men (ibid.), and most described themselves as either businessmen or traders (Bodomo 2012), but in recent years, the gender ratio has likewise seemed to change the share of women on the rise (Haugen 2022, 49). Castillo (2021a, 9) notes, however, that research trying to trace nationalities present in the city have come up with very different accounts; this may be a consequence of researchers’ positionality and their differing access to communities.

There is no conclusive truth about the exact number of Africans in Guangzhou due to similar methodological problems, among them differing definitions of the population, lack of official data and the differing legal statuses of individuals residing in Guangzhou (Castillo 2021a), the latter of which will be discussed further in a moment. Thus, scholarly estimates

have differed vastly, and the methods for achieving the estimates have at times been opaque. For example, an estimate by Li et al. (2009, 709) cites “general agreement” among migrants, Chinese residents, officials, and scholars to place the size of the African presence in the city around 15,000–20,000 individuals, whereas Bodomo (2020, 528) estimates there are approximately 100,000 Africans in Guangzhou based on “many years of field visits and questionnaire surveys”. The validity of the has at times amounted to a topic of impassioned debate (see for example Bodomo & Pajancic 2015) regarding which sources should be prioritized and whether there is even any need for an accurate estimate of the size of the “group”.

The number of Africans in the city has been a cause of speculation and controversies among Chinese netizens, too (Haugen 2019, 48). A 2014 study published by the Guangzhou Developmental Agency suggested the number of Africans in the city would be up to 200,000 individuals, and the subsequent attention this claim attracted led to the local government releasing official figures on the African population for the first time: some 16,000 people (ibid.). Another point in which the local government decided to publish data on the African population in Guangzhou was during the incidents that took place in 2020 in the context of a rise in imported cases of COVID-19. According to Guangzhou city government (People’s Government of Guangdong Province 2020a), in December 2019, the city was home to 86,475 foreigners, of whom 13,652 individuals were from African countries; and by April 10, 2020, the number had dropped to 30,768 foreign citizens and 4,553 Africans. However, due to reasons cited above, this figure, and the apparent drop in the population should be treated with a grain of salt (Castillo 2021a). The interest this elusive figure has drawn by the Chinese public and scholars alike suggests the sensitivity and importance attached to the issue.

Roberto Castillo (2021a, 1) argues that black Africans in Guangzhou mark the first time a non-Asian “group” of foreigners thrives in China and largely in an unregulated manner. In contrast to this, as mentioned earlier, black Africans in the PRC were often either high-profile invitees or exchange students with relatively generous funding and benefits. Africans in Guangzhou are not immigrants, if the term is understood to refer to people aiming to relocate their families and settle in a new home country. Indeed, most Africans do not view Guangzhou as a destination (Castillo 2021a, 9). Instead, varying degrees of transience characterize African mobility to China – a significant proportion travel between their home country and China with no aim to settle down (Niu 2018). Thus, Niu (ibid.) has argued for

labeling Africans in Guangzhou as “transients” rather than immigrants based both on Africans’ self-understanding and the context of the Chinese legislative framework.

Castillo (2021a, 164) argues similarly that the label of “immigration” flattens types of movement; for example, motivating factors behind Africans risking their lives while relocating to Southern borders of the European Union are very different to those who fly to Guangzhou (Castillo 2021a, 164). Castillo (*ibid.*) describes most Africans arriving to Guangzhou as generally middle-class and with personal aspirations he calls “entrepreneurial drives”. Furthermore, the rising numbers of African individuals moving through China is not only a consequence of “the rise of China” but also of the economic development of African countries (*ibid.*, 4). These developments have impacted African imaginations of China, as has Chinese presence in African countries and Chinese soft power efforts aimed at Africans.

As mentioned previously, legal statuses of Africans residing in Guangzhou vary, with a “significant proportion” of the Guangzhou African population being visa overstayers (Castillo 2021a, 9). Researchers point to PRC visa policies as facilitating the phenomenon (Haugen 2023, Huang 2020, Niu 2018). These policies have been tightened since the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Huang 2020, 196). Both obtaining visas to China in African countries and residence permits or long-term visas once in China have become harder than before (Haugen 2019, 45–46). Furthermore, the 2012 Exit and Entry Administration Law made it compulsory for foreigners residing in China to register their residence once arriving in the country (Haugen 2019, 62). The law has been an attempt to crack down on undocumented foreigners in the country but has also become the first step toward irregularization for many Africans (*ibid.*). Requiring residence registration has made it possible to keep foreigners out of certain districts – which has increasingly happened with Africans in Guangzhou (Haugen 2012). The way in which Chinese bureaucracy affects visa overstaying is well exemplified with the type of business visa Africans typically enter Guangzhou with. The business visa has an “unreasonably short” duration of 30 days (Huang 2020, 196). According to current legislation, this type of visa also requires an exit visa, which in turn requires an application (Haugen & Huang 2023, 243). Applying for an exit visa in turn requires residence registration. A failure to register accommodation may hence easily become a bigger problem, which has also led to a situation in which whether an individual “falls” into an undocumented status is resolved at grassroots level: it is at the hands of landlords, hotel managers, and the lowest level of public security officials. (*ibid.*)

The institutional and legal standing of Africans in Guangzhou has implications for the accuracy of characterizing instances of apparent racism, as well. Castillo (2021a, 104) notes that Africans have been categorized as a “floating population” (流动人口) since 2008 and argues that some of the difficulties Africans face in China are mostly related to this status, which is very similar to that of internal migrants in China. Castillo suggests Africans’ visa problems could be compared to the strict household registration (户口) system imposed on the domestic population (ibid.). Castillo argues that this new status, during which Africans have faced increased control, is characterized by researchers and other observers not familiar with internal migrants’ treatment as stemming from a racist bias specifically against Africans. (ibid.)

A survey conducted in 2009–2012 found that Chinese perceptions of Africans in Guangzhou are mixed (Zhou et al. 2016). While some physical, social, and cultural traits were viewed negatively, the researchers found that there was no evidence of “racialization processes” akin to those in the Global North. Rather, Africans were often seen as a positive force in the local economy and contributing to Guangzhou's globalization. It's noteworthy that a significant portion of the survey respondents were internal migrants who may have a shared experience of marginalization (ibid., 157). In the informal rental market, for instance, Africans may be preferred over internal migrants (ibid.). This dynamic indicates a complex hierarchy and suggests that the internal migrants’ views on Africans are shaped not only by race or ethnicity but also by their position within the social and economic fabric of the city.

2.3 Constructing race in a constrained online environment

As mentioned in earlier sections of this thesis, the internet and its social media platforms constitute a major arena for expressing views and meanings related to race. The internet plays an important role in “mediating popular perceptions of Africans in China” (Lan 2016, 305) and stories related to race are common and among the most popular on Chinese social media (Pfafman et al. 2015). At the same time, the internet is considered a key area of national interest by the party-state, and social media is highly controlled through regulation, censorship, and surveillance; thus, the Chinese internet has been described as “techno-nationalist” (Hamm & Lin 2019, 256). This refers treating technology as a national asset and the use of a mix of liberal and nationalistic policies to reach national goals. Xi-era China’s efforts to further consolidate a Chinese internet, independent from the “West” may well be understood as a techno-nationalist project (ibid.). It is essential, then, for the validity of this

study to closely consider this environment and how it may affect the authenticity and validity of postings on social media.

Margaret E. Roberts (2018) calls PRC censorship *porous*, as circumventing censorship is feasible and low-profile users who do so are rarely punished over accessing information beyond the Great Firewall. PRC censorship does not, for the most part, depend on absolute bans on information; instead, this porous censorship may be characterized as a *tax* on information (ibid., 2). This refers to how the act of making access to information more difficult, but not impossible, has an important stymying effect on most internet users' motivation to seek out alternatives. High-profile users are the main target of overt censorship or fear-based tactics, whereas for regular netizens, other tactics of censorship are emphasized to minimize observable censorship (ibid., 19). Control is carried out also on a technological level, such as the "Great Firewall" which refers to a constellation of technologies which systematically block access to certain foreign websites from Chinese IP addresses. Technological censorship is furthermore paired with a surveillance system based on nationwide cyber police forces to ensure the execution of internet regulation. (ibid., 164).

The extensive internet surveillance has led to a practice of self-censorship among Chinese internet users regarding expressing their personal opinions through digital media technologies (Peng 2020, 26). At the same time, the degree of self-censorship should not be overstated. Peng (ibid., 28) notes that the tension between internet users and censorship is often also based on an assumption that views the Chinese digital public sphere as a battlefield where users try to constantly fight censorship and promote democracy. Control over the internet has led to Chinese internet users employing creative approaches, such as using Chinese characters with similar pronunciations to forbidden words to discuss certain topics, creating a unique digital culture of expressing opinions online (Gu and Ho 2023). In this vein, direct use of race-related keywords prone to censorship is avoided by replacing one of the Chinese characters with the transliteration to pinyin, for example by writing "ni 哥" instead of both characters to type the n-slur in Chinese (ibid., 16–17). Alternatively, users may switch characters in a particular term into homonymns in order to bypass censorship but still convey the word they want to, or use acronyms, for example, "hg" short for black ghost (黑鬼 *hēiguǐ*), a pejorative term similar to the n-slur (ibid.).

Various government bodies such as the CCP Propaganda Department (中共中央宣传部) and the Cyberspace Administration of China (国家互联网信息办公室) (Roberts 2018, 106–108)

exert control over China's internet through laws and regulations. For example, article 12 of the 2016 Cybersecurity Law refers to the constitution of the PRC and lists what the internet must not be used for. This includes activities such as inciting separatism and endangering national security and unity, but also inciting ethnic hatred and discrimination. In line with national legislation, Zhihu's rules of use explicitly forbid all content "objecting to the basic principles of the constitution": among these are inciting ethnic hatred, ethnic discrimination, and undermining ethnic unity (Zhihu, no date). In principle, racism could fall under "ethnic discrimination" and present significant obstacles for expressing ideas of the topic on a Chinese social media platform.

However, all topics are not censored to the same extent. It is content with "collective action potential" against the party-state that has been found to be the main target of overt content censorship (King et al. 2013). Criticism that does not incite collective action is more likely tolerated. This selective tolerance of domestic criticism makes some critical discussion possible, including discussions of race, which are not deemed "overtly dissident" by censors and are likely to go unchecked (Pfafman et al. 2015, 541). In fact, discussing race is possible to such an extent in the Chinese internet that the international NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) contended in 2023 that Chinese authorities "should stop facilitating this toxic environment" of major Chinese social media platforms, in which anti-black content is left relatively unchecked by censors (Human Rights Watch 2023). This in turn suggests a tolerance for racist discussion from the party-state, the possible political benefit of which remains unclear. Generally, the party-state utilizes the internet to scout public opinion to prevent instability (Roberts 2018). Gu and Ho (2023, 17) suggest that turning a blind eye to anti-black racism in Chinese social media may serve government interests by possibly boosting nationalist sentiments. HRW's analysis suggests that users post racist content also to attract traffic and generate profit (Human Rights Watch 2023).

In sum, the highly controlled online sphere presents challenges for study as it affects self-expression of netizens; however, research has shown that the subject of race and racism seem not to be subjects of overt censorship. Furthermore, the ways in which party-state control over contents of communication is circumvented through the use of language gives Chinese netizens tools to discuss the topics they wish. At the same time, this may lead to a semi-coded language often opaque in its meaning and difficult to decipher by an outsider. Though the Chinese online sphere presents challenges as a field, it may be argued that civic engagement on the topic of race is possible despite restrictions, and while keeping mind the

limitations posed by censorship measures, the online discussions of race may be examined as valid expressions of opinion by Chinese netizens.

3 Theoretical background and definitions

This study adheres to a social constructionist theoretical framework, which is adopted from critical race scholars who have conceptualized race as socially constructed as opposed to a biological “fact”. Furthermore, this thesis is informed by global systems theory which seeks to incorporate race into a global context. In this chapter, I discuss these theoretical underpinnings and define some key terms. The first subchapter starts with an introductory definition of arguably the most central term regarding this research project, that is, the concept of race, and discusses related concepts of racism and racialization. After this, I discuss the implications for race and racialization in contexts outside former settler societies, and in China specifically. Then I discuss how Han Chineseness aligns with global whiteness and what implications this has for the present study.

3.1 The social construction of race

As it is commonly defined in contemporary critical research on the concept, this research project contends that race is not a biological characteristic, but a socially produced system of categorization. Simply put, this means no set combination of physical or cultural features equal a certain race, as race is not something inherent, natural, or “out there” to be observed. Although such a general constructionist position is widely shared, what comes after the truism “race is a social construct” includes a range of stances from what Gracia (2017) calls *eliminationists* in one end, arguing for ending the use of the concept of race altogether (or replacing with another term such as ethnicity), to *neo-realists* on the other end, who argue that the concept of race corresponds to some sense of reality. For example, also critical race scholars have criticized race as mere social construction as a limiting conceptualization in that it does not consider the ways in which the “unreal” race may well become real and have biological effects as well (e.g., Lentin 2020).

Therefore, a note on why this research project utilizes the concept of race rather than some other concept is in place, specifically since “Africans” do not constitute a race, nor do the “Chinese” – both would more likely be associated with the concept of *ethnicity*. The interrelationship of the concepts of race and ethnicity has been a topic of contentious academic debate ever since “ethnicity” emerged after the Second World War (Goldberg & Solomos 2001). Some scholars have argued for solely using ethnicity to avoid reifying the concept of race (see for example Zack 2001; Miles 1989). Likewise, Ang & Martin (2024, 4), for example, explicitly state that they prefer the word ethnicity in their study of racialization

of white Westerners in China. Although ethnicity may be a useful concept in some context, I argue against replacing race with ethnicity. Simply put, discussing race keeps its historical links to colonialisms, imperialism, and slavery, through which race has had profound implications for individuals and communities throughout history and continues to do so. Not using the concept of race does not make the material reality of racism go away – on the contrary, replacing race with ethnicity hinders our ability to discuss specific differences and thus ability to challenge ethnic and racial discrimination (Song 2018). Furthermore, the assumption that race could be supplanted by other categories fails to account for how race intersects with these categories, often compounding the effects of inequality (ibid.). Thus, this study intentionally chooses to discuss race and racism instead of ethnicity.

For the purposes of this study, race may be defined as a specific way of organizing meaning, where significance is given to certain perceived features of human groups to rationalize unequal power relationships between groups. Race encompasses many dimensions and is both an identity and a social category. Most importantly, however, race is a historically situated tool of domination, or, following Alana Lentin (2020, 11: “a technology for the management of human difference” (ibid., 11). The concept of racialization, on the other hand, shifts the focus to practices which reify ideas of race and racism. Racialization and the concept of race are built on a specific relationship (Keskinen et al. 2021, 52–53). An influential definition proposed by Omi and Winant (1986, 111) defines racialization as: “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group.” Racialization, then, emphasizes the *process* of race; one could call it race as a verb.

Whereas everyday use of racism refers often to attitude or prejudice on the basis of race, in academic research, it is generally defined as a system and an organized power structure created through the process of racialization. (Keskinen et al. 2021, 54) Goldberg (2009, 5) sums the relationship as follows: “If race (or, ideologically, racialism) is about the manufacture of homogeneities, racisms police their boundaries.” Racism is multifaceted and it appears differently in different contexts; this is why often researchers speak of *racisms* in plural. Racisms may be categorized on the basis of dimensions – structural, cultural and everyday racism, for example – or based on the group of people targeted, such as anti-black racism or Islamophobia (Keskinen, Mkwesha & Seikkula 2021, 57). Furthermore, the manifestations of race and racism change over time and place. Stuart Hall writes (2019, 40): “Wherever racism occurs, it is always historically specific, determined by each era, culture, and societal form. It is necessary to analyze these specific differences.” This is not hard to

grasp when looking at Chinese society and its relationship to race: the overview of historical developments of the conceptualization of race in China show how it has changed over time and how this conceptualization has greatly affected by developments in politics and economy.

Fundamental to the concept of race is constructing difference between categories of people. The categorization into races takes its cue from physical and cultural characteristics such as skin color, clothing, and language, which function as carriers of meaning employed to create difference (Hall 2019, 35). This process of attaching meaning is called the signifying process. When the signifying process is used as means to create difference, it is also called *othering*, a practice which influential British cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall theorized extensively. Following Hall (2019, 35), race is further perpetuated through practices, which include social norms, beliefs, and power structures; sometimes these practices are called ideological discourse. Hall maintains that as discourse, race is not truth but a Foucauldian “regime of truth”: race becomes real – meaning, it shapes reality and has real effects on people – through discursive operations (Hall 2017, 81). Michel Foucault (1970) contends that knowledge is produced through discourse, which, while akin to rhetoric, encompasses a broader spectrum that integrates practices and is deeply rooted in historical context. According to Foucault, discourses are not merely exchanges of information but social practices that systematically constitute the subjects and objects they discuss. The potency of discourses lies in their ability to generate information, beliefs, and perceived “truths” about their subjects. Significantly, Foucault posited that this knowledge production influences reality itself; for instance, societal understanding of crime directly impacts how criminals are punished. This concept aligns with Gramsci’s notion of hegemony, which encompasses the exercise of power, including ideological dominance, over others and is inclusive of both the subjugated and the dominant groups in society.

Drawing on Jacques Lacan’s theorizing of sexual difference, Hall argues that othering in the form of constructing racial opposites has to do with the stabilizing of one’s self-identity (2019, 44). This notion of the dialectical character of racialization is similar to Edward Said’s (1992) theorization of the function of *orientalism*, the modern European construction of the other in the Orient: the “Oriental” is othered not only in order to control the Oriental, but to stabilize and do away with the internal complexities of the Occidental, the western. In other words, by defining and marginalizing certain racial groups as the other, dominant groups seek to secure and reinforce their own sense of identity and superiority; according to Hall, to stabilize it (2019, 44). This representation is constructed through racialized discourse, which

is structured by binary oppositions: white or black, culture or nature, purity or pollution – in other words, stereotyping (Hall 2001, 244). Racialized discourse fixes meaning, secures it to binaries, in which stereotyping is a key strategy (ibid., 257–258). In sum, racialization attaches meaning not only to the other but also to the “norm”, through qualities such as progressive, civilized, and superior. This way, whiteness, too, is a product of and central to racializing processes. Likewise, the preceding chapters noted how concept of Han emerged in the context of anti-Manchu sentiment and foreign intrusions into China; subsequently, a systematic discourse of race took hold.

3.2 Applying theories of race to China

Race and racism in non-Euro-American contexts have still received less attention by scholars (Raghuram 2022), as are contexts in which it is Asian people who are perpetuating racialization (Ang et al. 2022). This, together with the above sketched conceptualization of race as global yet different local manifestations, makes the case for applying the theories to the Chinese context. However, the fact that current manifestations of race and racism are rooted in Western colonialisms has been utilized to deflect conversations around race and racism in China, both by Chinese and non-Chinese actors alike. Though studies of race and racism in China exist, scholars of China are reluctant to apply critical racial theories to Africa-China contexts (Sheridan 2023, 3310). This section addresses this discussion, which I argue is symptomatic of Chinese exceptionalism and overlooks the contribution of global and postcolonial frameworks of race and racism.

Over the long-term, race has been overlooked by scholars of Africa-China relations. The official PRC stance that there is no racial discrimination in China has led to a scholarly blind spot among Chinese scholars (Cheng 2019, 13), with research on racism may be considered unpatriotic and a topic which Chinese scholars could face harsh criticism for embarking on (Gu & Ho 2023, 2). On the other hand, white researchers of China may avoid the topic due to their relative ignorance to issues of race (ibid., 10–14). This gap in research has only recently begun to be addressed, with studies on race in the context of Sino-African relations emerging as a nascent subfield.

In popular discourse, a major defense of the “Western concept of race” has to do with the idea that race does not have salience in China and the perception that the Chinese have been and are solely a victim of racism and racialization (Cheng 2019,17). According to Yinhong Cheng (ibid.), many Chinese believe that China does not have racial diversity and that there has

never been persecution based on race in China. To many, racism is only recognized in its institutionalized and extreme forms, and in events like the Holocaust and the transatlantic slave trade, whereas more mundane examples of essentializing thinking are often not recognized as such. Cheng further points out that concepts such as class and gender in China were, too, initially deemed “Western” but later integrated into Chinese discourse (ibid., 13). Furthermore, young and educated Chinese often cite naïvety and ignorance as reasons for apparent Chinese racism (Castillo 2021a, 149).

Roberto Castillo has been the one scholar to consistently address and analyze the conceptualization of race and racism in Chinese studies (e.g., 2014, 2020, 2021a). Castillo argues that it is marred by methodological issues and lack of critical reflection on the meanings of race and racism in the African and Chinese contexts and specifically applying them to China (and Africa) uncritically is problematic. Likewise, many scholars have attempted to encapsulate the racial hierarchy in the Chinese context. Amoah (2021, 244) goes as far as to call the specific racisms that have sprung up in the context of PRC “Racism with Chinese characteristics” or “Chinese supremacy”. Constructions of race and racism in non-former settler contexts are sometimes conceptualized as “South-South racialization”, which has been adopted by some scholars discussing race in China (Sautman & Yan 2016).

Many China scholars have called for the *triangulation* of race as a theoretical tool to reconceptualize Chinese perceptions of blackness (Castillo 2020, Lan 2016, Monson 2013). Triangulating race was first coined by critical race theorist Claire Kim in her study of Asian Americans and the myth of the “model minority” (1999). In a sentence, a general understanding of triangulation “introduces” a third party to the conceptualization of race in China: blackness in the Chinese context should be assessed not only in relation to China and Chineseness, but also to the West and whiteness (Castillo 2020). Castillo argues that this reference point of Western whiteness has always been in the discussion, but it has often been left invisible (ibid.) This idea is further complicated by Castillo's proposed concept of “multiple triangulations,” where the framework does not simply add a third element for comparison but invites a multifaceted analysis that intersects with other critical social dimensions like gender and geopolitics, as well as race (Castillo, 2020, 325). For example, Castillo examines an instance of blackface on Chinese television, arguing that a mere triangulation of the history of this racist archetype is insufficient. Instead, a more comprehensive analytical triangulation that includes race, gender, and geopolitics offers deeper insights. (ibid.)

However, it is unclear what triangulation means in practice beyond considering multiple positions and perspectives within analysis, specifically that of Western whiteness. As mentioned earlier in this section, the understanding of race this thesis follows is informed by postcolonial approaches. Commenting on triangulation, Hyunh & Park (2019, 160), note that it highlights a broader concern: that by focusing solely on Chinese and African actors, or even (nation)states, can obscure our understanding of larger global power structures and processes. I argue that the method of triangulation does just this - emphasizes the local/national contexts but misses the bigger picture, which ties all race and racism into a wider hierarchically based racial field.

Building on global systems theory, critical race scholar Michelle Christian (2019) puts forward a global critical race and racism (GCRR), which both situates race and racism globally and considers variation on the national and/or local level. Christian (ibid.) argues that a global white supremacy underpins all countries' racial hierarchies with antiblackness at the other end of the spectrum. Crucially, this global whiteness is *deep*, meaning a perpetuation of white supremacist structures that were never eradicated even in the post-colonial moment. The GCRR framework conceptualizes whiteness as a form of racial capital which may be adopted by historically "non-white" groups (ibid., 14) The difference between triangulation and a GCCR framework is that the former conceptualizes Chinese racial hierarchies in *interaction with* Western whiteness, whereas the latter emphasizes it being *integrated in* global white supremacy. (ibid.) Through GCCR, Han Chineseness is understood to use the concept of race and situate it in the framework of global whiteness, as a historically non-white group which has since utilized whitening mechanisms to access characteristics associated with whiteness. In this vein of analysis, Han Chinese supremacy reproduces racialized hierarchies informed by whiteness rather than disrupts them.

Recent scholarship has challenged the view of earlier research from the 1980s and 1990s which presented Han Chinese an "empty" category mostly defined as the negative of "ethnic groups" or the officially recognized ethnic minority groups in the PRC, and instead proposing Han Chineseness as a central position (Leibold 2010, Hasmath 2024). Hasmath (2024,4) analyzes the "ethno-racial privilege" of the Han and positions the category alongside whiteness, with which it holds considerable commonality with. Hasmath argues that in comparison to "Western" whiteness, Han Chinese privilege relies to a greater extent to state policies: It is through PRC ethnic categorization that both "ethnic identities" and the Han Chinese identity have gained meaning. Han Chineseness as a category has less to do with

distinctions based on appearance – though phenotypical categorization is utilized against visible minorities such as Turkic populations and Tibetans.

Importantly, influenced by the narrative of the “century of humiliation”, that sees the nation and particularly the Han Chinese self-understanding conceptualizes victims rather than acknowledging any privilege they may hold. This lack of self-awareness of privilege is reflected in the discontent among some Han Chinese netizens towards affirmative action policies benefiting ethnic minorities (Hasmath 2024). Christian (2019) notes that the privileges gained by groups historically construed as non-white through these whitening practices are, however, fundamentally unstable. This is why Han Chinese, in dominant position within China, may be racialized as inferior in other contexts. It is then not self-evident that even when operating in a global context with roots to white supremacy that Han Chinese people may in other contexts face racism themselves – as they undeniably also have, as evidenced by anti-Asian sentiments around the world during COVID-19.

In sum, race, understood as a social construct with global scope, is a category intrinsically linked with racism which continues to operate along colonial lines. The conceptualization of race and racism balance its global nature with local forms, its historical situatedness with its continuing significance and changing manifestations over time. Following the idea of deep and malleable whiteness as put forward by Christian (*ibid.*), this thesis understands Han privilege in fact operating in the same global system with white privilege. This contextualization is essential because it reframes the discussion of race in China from merely pointing out similarities to recognizing the interconnectedness of various forms of privilege and discrimination within a global hierarchical system of race. Analysis without recognition of this system would imply that the position of Han Chinese resembles aspects of white privilege spontaneously, which in turn would imply that racism is an inherent trait of humanity rather than the historically contingent structure of domination it is.

4 Methodology, data, and research design

Although identifying patterns across data may be performed using multiple different methods, this study employs qualitative thematic analysis. This chapter introduces this choice of method, which is driven both by the research question and the social constructionist theoretical framework adopted in this research project. Then, I consider some limitations and ethical considerations posed by this choice and examine how my positionality as researcher impacts this research endeavor.

4.1 Thematic analysis as a method

The small number of existing academic studies that have engaged with online representations of race and racism in China have largely used qualitative or mixed-method approaches. Early studies, which employed grounded theory (Pfafman et al. 2015), or an unspecified type of qualitative textual analysis (Cheng 2011, Shen 2009), established that discourses of race are abundant in the Chinese online sphere and that netizens construct Africans as a racial other. Recent research has particularly paid attention to the linguistic devices used in social media discussion, many employing specifically critical discourse analysis on textual data (Ang & Martin 2024, Gu & Ho 2023, Liu et al. 2021, Zhang 2019) as well as on short videos (Cai 2023).

Similar to existing literature, this research project aims to first and foremost describe the object of research, thus, a qualitative approach is suitable. However, this research project opts for thematic analysis over recently prominent discourse analysis. The methods are similar and somewhat overlapping. In fact, thematic approaches grounded in a social constructionist epistemology are sometimes called “thematic discourse analysis” (Braun & Clarke 2006, 85). I call this method thematic analysis because 1) the primary interest of this research project is to describe recurrent patterns across data rather than to emphasize rhetoric or linguistic tools utilized by discussants and 2) thematic analysis is looser in definition and has less specific theoretical underpinnings, making it more flexible and accessible as a method (ibid., 81).

Since thematic analysis lacks these theoretical “obligations”, it is important that the theoretical position of this analysis is clearly presented (Braun & Clarke 2006, 81). As discussed in chapter 3, the social constructivist lens which this study employs recognizes that perceptions of race are socially constructed through interactions, discourse, and shared meanings within a given community or society. Thematic analysis fits to this thesis topic well due to its contextual sensitivity. Specifically, thematic analysis from a constructionist

framework “seeks to theorize the sociocultural contexts, and structural conditions, that enable the individual accounts that are provided.” (ibid.) The general exploratory analytic approach of this research project is reflected in the open-ended research question and in the fact that codes and concurrent themes are not predetermined (Guest et al., 2012). Importantly, however, this research project seeks a specific aspect in the data; thus, the goal is not to describe the entirety of the dataset.

Literature on the development of the concept of race and its reproduction in language suggests that meanings related to race are often not explicitly stated; in fact, they are often denied having anything to do with it (van Dijk 1992). I argue that including these ways of reproducing race in analysis has the possibility to reveal underlying biases and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of race. Thus, this thesis project employs the latent/interpretative, which, as opposed to a semantic or explicit approach, goes beyond the surface level, and identifies *underlying* ideas and assumptions that are “theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (Braun & Clarke 2006, 84). Therefore, “the development of the themes themselves involves interpretative work” (ibid.).

This study combines data-driven and theory-driven approaches, with an emphasis on the data. The themes analyzed are constructed primarily through engaging with the material. A data-driven approach is suitable to the study of the concept of race, the discourses of which are highly context-dependent and thus manifest in numerous ways. As Frank Dikötter (1994a, 406) writes: “Far from being fixed or static entities, the polyphony and adaptability of racial narratives in different historical circumstances should be recognized if their enduring appeal is to be understood.” Furthermore, a more “grounded” approach more appropriate in a situation where theory is developed in another social context, and specifically regarding questions of race (Castillo 2021a). This allows for adapting the theoretical views developed in other contexts to suit China.

However, at the same time, analysis is affected and to some extent guided by the literature I have engaged with prior to analysis. Some argue that this may narrow a researcher’s field of analysis, but it may also sensitize to subtler features in a dataset (Braun & Clarke 2006, 86). Furthermore, theory gives guidance to a researcher on what is important and worth noticing about a topic (Guest et al. 2012). I hold that especially since race is a loaded term which many would prefer to avoid – as mentioned above – and current ways of engaging with race are built on an embroidery of local and global histories, having detailed knowledge of this history

through literature aids in recognizing these discourses and thus conducting meaningful analysis of the phenomenon.

4.2 Gathering data from Zhihu

Launched in 2011, Zhihu (知乎) is a social question-answering and discussion platform, similar to for example Quora. The choice to opt for Zhihu as opposed to other widely used social media platforms in the PRC is twofold. First, the issues of interest regarding this research project, African migrants in Guangzhou and the concept of race, are discussed on the platform in threads that attract lively discussion. When searching for the topic of “black people” on using the site’s search engine, the next suggested result is “black people in Guangzhou” (广州黑人). As of March 28, 2023, the topic had attracted 440 million views and prompted 296 000 question threads.

Second, the contents and functions of Zhihu discussions are specifically suitable for the purposes of this research project. The main feature of Zhihu are question threads generated by registered users. Zhihu discussion threads are organized under a tree structure: questions are posted under a general topic, and the questions receive answers from other registered users who may furthermore add comments on the answers. Registered users can also upvote both the questions and answers by clicking agree (赞同). Downvoting is not possible. The default order Zhihu shows responses to a reader appears to be ranked on the basis of likes and comments a given response has received, which differs from the common structure of a discussion thread or a forum, in which conversation is presented chronologically. On Zhihu, answers are often composed as lengthy “informative essays” (Peng 2020, 8). User-generated content on Zhihu consists, then, of “quality, argumentative and information-rich postings” which are especially suitable for qualitative analysis (Zhang 2020, 96). On social question-and-answer platforms, users do not only seek fact-oriented answers for informational questions but also ask conversational questions which are aimed to spark up discussions; in other words, besides knowledge, Zhihu users also seek social orientation and representation (Hamm & Lin 2019, 256).

The suitability of Zhihu question threads for qualitative analysis has been confirmed in recently published research which have explored constructions of whiteness during COVID-19 (Ang & Martin 2024), characteristics of Chinese populist discourse (Zhang 2020), Chinese online discourse on genetically modified food (Liang et al. 2019) and gender politics (Peng et

al. 2020, Peng 2020). Academic accounts of Zhihu user demographics are scarce, but media reports suggest they are mostly professionals and university students living in first and second-tier cities, better paid and educated than most Chinese internet users, with 80 percent holding a bachelor's degree or higher (Ifeng 2021).

Zhihu is not exclusively available to mainland Chinese users, as the website may be accessed worldwide. In 2023, Zhihu reported it has 100 million “monthly active users” which it defines as the number of mobile devices that launch Zhihu’s mobile app at least once a month and the number of logged-in users who visit Zhihu’s PC or mobile website at least once a month (Zhihu 2023). The report does not specify whether all these users are located in the PRC, but the figure gives a general idea of the popularity of the platform. For comparison, Weibo has approximately 500 million monthly users (Weibo 2021) and all mainland Chinese internet users amount to 1,067 billion (CNNIC 2023, 23).

Thus, though not a similar online giant as Weibo, Zhihu is a relatively popular platform among Chinese netizens, and the user-generated contents are in a form that is especially suitable for qualitative analysis. Most importantly, the platform hosts discussion threads on the topic of the present study. Next, I discuss the sampling and coding of data retrieved from Zhihu.

4.2.1 Sampling and coding of textual data

To identify a question thread suitable for the purposes of this study, Zhihu question threads were sampled based on 1) their reference to the research question and 2) the level of engagement in the threads, assessed by the number of views, replies, and comments they had accumulated. The second criterion was added to ensure there would be a sufficient amount of textual data to analyze patterns within the dataset. The sampling approach was, then, purposive. Suitable discussion threads were found through both the search bar and relevant hashtags, such as “black people in Guangzhou” (广州黑人) together with “COVID-19” (新冠病毒). Among the various question threads concerning COVID-19 cases within Africans in Guangzhou, the thread with the highest number of responses was chosen.

The question thread, posted on April 14, 2020, is titled 广州检测 4553 名非洲籍人士，111 人新冠病毒核酸呈阳性，应如何应对 (“Guangzhou tested 4553 African nationals, and 111 people were positive for COVID-19. How should this situation be addressed?"). Below this title, the post is a 355-character text primarily quoting a news story about the detection of

cases among African individuals and the corresponding quarantine and testing measures. A local official is quoted denying racial discrimination:

广州市公安局副局长陈永球表示，在近期的防疫工作中，广州市对非洲籍人士的隔离和核酸检测措施完全沿用了此前对中国公民和外籍人士的统一措施，“我们对隔离期间的非洲籍人士提供了同样的指定酒店和工作人员，没有任何的种族或民族歧视。”

Chen Yongqiu, Deputy Director of the Guangzhou Public Security Bureau, stated that in recent epidemic prevention efforts, Guangzhou has applied the same quarantine and nucleic acid testing measures to individuals of African nationality, following the unified measures for Chinese citizens and foreigners. "We have provided the same designated hotels and staff for individuals of African nationality during the isolation period, without any racial or ethnic discrimination."

The question explicitly references the framework of this study, imported COVID-19 cases in Guangzhou and specifically cases among Africans. Furthermore, the function of this specific thread seemed, based on the news story paired with an open-ended question, to not be finding information on the issue, but rather conversational, aiming to pool other Zhihu users' opinions on it. The question received (as of May 13, 2024) 430 answers, many of which have tens of comments, some even over a hundred. The question had accumulated nearly 1,8 million views, which, according to my judgement, amounts to lively discussion, though not an extremely "hot" topic in the context of Chinese social media.

For reasons of feasibility, only the most relevant elements of the discussion thread were included to the dataset. In a Zhihu thread, the question and its answers generally include the main argumentative contents, while comments posted under answers are usually shorter in length, often expressing a reaction – generally either agreement or disagreement with the answer. Some answers also included images, which were for the most part either memes or screenshots from news articles or other material the author provided as sources for their text. According to my assessment, neither the comments nor the images introduced new or substantial elements to the text, nor were they crucial for understanding the meaning of any of the textual data. For this reason, both comments and images were excluded from the analysis. The collection of data started from the top of the discussion thread and continued down; thus, responses with the most engagement were included in analysis.

As thematic analysis is highly dependent on the researchers' interpretation both in defining data items (codes) and applying them, reliability is a key point of concern (Guest et al. 2012).

Likewise, developing themes is largely dependent on the researchers' judgement; thematic analysis allows for several ways to determine themes as long as this chosen path is consistent (Braun & Clarke 2006, 82–83). Thus, there is a risk of the researcher imposing preconceived themes on the dataset. For this reason, I describe the process of coding and developing themes transparently both in this chapter and further in Chapter 5 alongside my analysis.

Furthermore, my awareness of my positionality as researcher, as discussed later in this chapter, contributes to this aim of transparency and thus the reliability of the study.

The first step of a rigorous thematic analysis is familiarizing oneself with the data: to read through the entirety of the dataset before coding (Braun and Clarke 2006, 87). Accordingly, 50 top answers in the discussion thread were read through while noting down initial ideas for codes and/or themes. I wrote notes on race-related points I observed and paid attention to patterns and recurring topics. However, once this process was completed, it was clear that more answers should be included in the analysis to avoid “anecdotalism”, meaning only a few instances of a pattern are analyzed as a theme, one common pitfall of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 95). More data was needed to properly identify valid themes. Thus, the decision was made to expand the analysis to include 80 top answers.

Based on these observations and notes, four candidate themes of race were formulated:

1. Illegal status of Africans in Guangzhou, *sanfei* discourse
2. Bad attitude and misbehavior of Africans in Guangzhou
3. Africans in Guangzhou pose a general threat to China
4. Accusations of racism against Africans in Guangzhou are being weaponized

After this initial familiarization, I continued to systematically code the dataset, which I in the end did multiple times, evaluating and fixing codes in the process. An example of coding is presented in Table 1 below. On closer reading of the dataset, it was evident that there was need for multiple levels of categories. Furthermore, the nature of the candidate theme 3 referring to a “general threat” needed changing; a distinctly geopolitical discourse emerged. The final thematic categories I formulated are presented in the next chapter with the findings of the research. This is just one example of the approach in which multiple rounds of coding

and translation aimed at formulating themes based on the data rather than my preconceptions as researcher.

Table 1: Excerpt from codebook

Quote (original Mandarin and English translation)	Code	Theme (Level 3)
<p>当然检测了是好事，问题是广州这三年情况都多少年了，以前装鸵鸟，这次盖子捂不住了。</p> <p>Of course, testing is a good thing, but the problem is Guangzhou's situation with sanfeis over many years.</p>	real problem is illegal foreigners	"hidden threat"
<p>应对方法：让本问题上不了热榜</p> <p>Response strategy: Do not let this issue get on the hot topics list.</p>	discussion on black Africans is restricted	"discussion has been stifled"
<p>外国人大声训斥我们中国人?? 如果我们对外所展示的善良，包容 最后却让我们国人受尽委屈，那是一件很可悲的事情。</p> <p>Foreigners loudly reprimanding us Chinese?? If the kindness and inclusiveness we display to the outside world result in injustice to our fellow countrymen, it is a very sad thing.</p>	benevolence towards outsiders results to injustice to Chinese people	"maintaining face disservices China"
<p>非洲籍人士端着“种族歧视”这个金饭碗，满世界伸手要福利，以后还可能要权力</p> <p>African nationals wield the golden golden rice bowl of "racial discrimination," reaching out their hands across the world, asking for welfare benefits, and potentially seeking power in the future.</p>	Africans use racism accusations for their benefit	"foreigners weaponize racism"
<p>广州对湖北人对武汉人的害怕，跟对外国人的害怕是一样的啊！因此，我们目前对外国人的态度其实是公正平等的</p> <p>Guangzhou's fear of people from Hubei and Wuhan is the same as the fear of foreigners! Therefore, our current attitude towards foreigners is actually fair and equal</p>	China has regional discrimination but no racism	"China does not have racism"

<p>但这些不守规矩，整天想着YP，作奸犯科，死皮赖脸的黑人，我只想和他说，哋屎啦，尼个！</p> <p>But these unruly black people, who think about YP all day long, violate the law and commit crimes, and are shamelessly causing trouble, I just want to say to them, go to hell, n-word!</p>	<p>black Africans are hypersexual, commit crimes</p>	<p>“they come here to be reckless”</p>
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As noted earlier, the dataset is in Mandarin Chinese, but the coding and analysis of the text is done in English. For this reason, I translated every reply manually before coding their contents. This translation process was iterative, and once an initial translation was completed, I kept the original Chinese with the translation to make it easy to compare and contrast the original with the English, which was furthermore done multiple times throughout the process of coding and analyzing the data. Inevitably some details and nuances were lost in translation, but since the main focus of this thesis project is not on linguistic tools utilized by netizens nor use of specific words, this possible limitation was deemed acceptable.

4.2.2 Is the discussion “Chinese”?

This research project aims to analyze constructions of race specific to the Chinese context. The use of this specific set of data includes, then, a significant assumption: that Zhihu as a China-based platform operating in Mandarin presents such a “Chinese context”. However, as noted in subchapter 3.3.1, access to Zhihu, as to most large social media platforms, is not limited to one specific area or country. On the contrary, it is not blocked by the Great Firewall, and one is able to create a profile with a phone number with over 180 different area codes. The discussion is in Chinese, but is it Chinese? In other words: to what degree can it be assumed that the authors of the dataset are mainland Chinese, and not just Chinese speakers from all around the world?

Many Zhihu public profiles display a geolocation tag which refers to the IP address of the device with which the user is connected to the internet, now in use across multiple social media platforms in the PRC (Koetse 2022). Observations of user profiles on Zhihu suggest that within the PRC, the tag tells which province the user is based in; for locations outside the PRC, the tag simply states the country’s name. After checking this tag for all 80 profiles whose contributions were included in the analysis, 54 profiles or 67.5% of discussants’ profiles included a geolocation. As presented in Table 2 below, all but one profile pointed to a

province within the PRC, and only one to a location outside the country, the United States. The most common location for IP address province was Guangdong - where the city of Guangzhou is located - with 18 tags. The remaining 36 location tags were other mainland provinces ranging from Guangxi in the south to Heilongjiang in the north. However, 25 out of 80 geolocation tags could not be found or did not exist. These included 11 replies posted with “private mode” on, which switches the user display name into an anonymous “Zhihu user”, as well as seven users who had deleted their profiles since posting their comments. Six IP tags pointed to “unknown location” – this, based on discussions on Zhihu, seems to happen when a profile is inactive for long, or if the user has used technical means to hide their IP address altogether.

Table 2: Location of authors according to Zhihu IP geolocation tags

Location according to geolocation tag (n=80)	Number of authors	Proportion of authors in the dataset (%)
Guangdong	19	23.75
anonymous/private mode	11	13.75
Other mainland provinces	9	11.25
Beijing	7	8.75
profile deleted	7	8.75
unknown	6	7.5
Hubei	6	7.5
Jiangsu	5	6.25
Heilongjiang	2	2.5
Jilin	2	2.5
Jiangxi	2	2.5
Zhejiang	2	2.5
United States	1	1.25
mainland total	54	67.5
outside the mainland	1	1.25
unknown/missing location total	25	31.25

In sum, the IP location tags seem to confirm that discussants are indeed mostly based in Mainland China, and furthermore in Guangdong province, to which the COVID-19 cases discussed in the question thread are linked to. Furthermore, both the usage of Mandarin Chinese and the topic referring to local developments in Guangzhou are strong hints that discussants are likely to be local people affected by the infection rates and corresponding

measures. Although this paired with the examination of IP tags gives some credibility to the assumption the authors are indeed mainlanders, it is not conclusive evidence. There is little possibility to evaluate whether the geolocation tags are a reliable indication of users' location. For example, the fairly common practice of using a VPN to climb the Great Firewall would alter the geolocation each time (Koetse 2022). While acknowledging the limitations of this geolocation data in determining discussants' nationalities, the dataset can still provide valuable insights into how race is discussed within a largely Chinese online context. Therefore, the precise nationality of discussants is not essential for achieving the research project's objectives.

4.3 Challenges and ethical considerations

This chapter discusses the challenges and ethical considerations that arise from the above presented research design. Namely, two themes are discussed: first, the ethics of using social media data, especially given the sensitive topic of race and the strictly controlled online public sphere in the PRC. Second, I consider the element of my positionality as researcher and its impacts on the research project at hand.

4.3.1 The ethics of utilizing social media data in research

The fast development of platforms and ways of using them has presented a major challenge for developing detailed instructions on proper use and storage of social media data; accordingly, the Association of Internet Researchers (2012, 2019) recommend evaluating questions of ethics on a case-by-case basis. Kosonen et al. (2018) however, lay out some rules of thumb that provide a framework for such consideration; this research project takes these suggestions as a point of reference. The central issue surrounding the dataset used in this thesis project revolves around the question of informed consent. Based on this reflection, this study did not obtain informed consent of the discussants since the social media data was deemed 1) publicly available and 2) unlikely to cause harm for any individuals, as well as 3) issues of feasibility.

First, I as a researcher have a detailed and critical understanding of the context of the material I wish to use, which is an essential requirement for an informed assessment of ethics, as possible harm caused is always dependent on who is speaking, the topic and the societal context of the message conveyed. (Kosonen et al. 2018). This understanding is expressed explicitly in chapter 3.1.3 discussing censorship and its effects on Chinese social media,

which concluded that discussions on race, even ones containing explicit racist language, seem not to be a primary target of PRC censorship.

As per Zhihu terms and conditions (2023), contents on the platform are public and may be accessed without logging in; users who have participated in the discussion are therefore unlikely to expect privacy. According to general research practices involving data from social media, obtaining consent for using publicly available data is most often not necessary (Kosonen et al. 2018, 119). From a legal perspective, all readily available online discussions are deemed public information regardless of their possibly sensitive contents (ibid.). At the same time, although discussants have knowingly participated in a discussion readily available to the public, the producer of the data may deem the contents private (Kosonen et al. 2018, 120). Upon learning that their social media data may be used for research purposes, individuals often express concerns and advocate for being informed or asked for consent before their data is included (Fiesler and Proferes, 2018). However, Zhihu terms and conditions stipulate that if a third party intends to republish content from users on Zhihu outside of the platform, regardless of the purpose (commercial or non-commercial), they must obtain separate authorization from the original author (Zhihu terms and conditions, 2023). I argue that strict adherence to these terms would present practical challenges for the present study.

A key factor taken into consideration is the fact that the discussion thread analyzed is more than three years old at the time of writing in spring 2024. All messages included in the analysis, likewise, were published in April 2020. Many accounts linked to answers have been disabled since publication and some users have opted to publish their replies in private mode, which hides the profile and username of an author from other discussants. In this context, obtaining consent of all participants would be practically impossible. Furthermore, given the extensive internet regulation policies within the People's Republic of China (PRC), it is reasonable to assume that the discussion – especially it being long, argumentative, and related to current affairs – has undergone scrutiny by various censorship mechanisms. The content has already been deemed acceptable within the PRC regulatory framework, thus minimizing the likelihood of causing harm or discomfort to authors by utilizing anonymized data from this thread.

Given the impracticability of securing informed consent, the anonymization of data emerged as a critical step. The data collection process involved manual extraction from the website,

during which usernames were deliberately excluded, ensuring anonymity from the outset. Additionally, the examination of geolocation IDs associated with authors was conducted independently. At no juncture were data points linking individual messages with users' geolocations, as indicated in their public profiles, stored together. While it is acknowledged that this approach does not absolve this research project of all ethical concerns, I contend that, given the circumstances discussed above, the requirement for informed consent is not necessary. Thus, the utilization of data from Zhihu, with appropriate anonymization and safeguards for user privacy, is deemed ethically acceptable for the purposes of this study.

4.3.2 Positionality

A critical theoretical approach which understands of race as social construct underscores the significance of acknowledging the interplay between systems of domination, social identities, and historical contexts in shaping knowledge production. Therefore, it is imperative for me to disclose my positionality as a researcher. By openly acknowledging the influence of my social position, experiences, and privileges on the research process and outcomes, I aim to promote transparency and reflexivity.

My perspective as researcher is normative: the system of domination that underpins the current global racial hierarchies is fundamentally unjust, and I aim to not only inform myself and others of it but to act against it in any way possible. Antiracism has guided this project from the very beginning, since it was this position that prompted me to choose the topic of race and racism in the Han Chinese context. Simply addressing race and racism doesn't do much to dispell it, either, just as the assumption that more interaction would lead to more tolerance is questionable. This position guided me to critical approaches to race of which I was earlier aware of but had not studied at any point in my studies. The lack of knowledge itself made me want to take up on the challenge to inform myself of what race and racism exactly mean – philosophically, materially, and politically.

This position of having little knowledge of race ties into my whiteness and Finnish nationality. My whiteness influences how I navigate and interpret racial dynamics and am aware it may lead to the reinforcement of dominant narratives or the overlooking of marginalized groups. Specifically, my whiteness predisposes me to “white innocence”; that is, denial of or blindness to racial discrimination. Thus, I remain an outsider both to Han Chinese and to black African racial positions, which impacts my perceptions and interpretations of racial issues. Likewise, my cultural and educational backgrounds predispose me to certain

assumptions or blind spots when exploring the experiences of black Africans in the digital space of a different cultural context. This is arguably visible in the theoretical framework, which takes “Western” theories and frameworks and their critique as its starting point, rather than discuss the rich literature of globalization of race in detail.

An outsider racial positionality was to be expected, but I was not fully prepared for the effects of the sensitivity of race in the Chinese context and my partial involvement in it. Personal interactions while in China and discussing my thesis topic there provided me with an idea of how fundamentally the idea of racism having salience in China may be opposed and that the act of exploring the topic critically may be understood as an effort of bad faith by many. Dealing with this requires reflexivity on my part as researcher so as not to become overly careful in my argumentation. For example, I initially – unconsciously – had strayed away from discussing links with Han Chineseness and whiteness out of fear of possibly offending some Chinese people. Through discussion with a much more knowledgeable peer, I found this to be a crucial blind spot for my analysis.

Despite its challenges, my outsider position allowed me to critically examine Han Chinese representations of black Africans without being entrenched in local biases or norms, enabling me to identify blind spots in my analysis and engage in deeper reflexivity to ensure the integrity and validity of my findings. Research positionality itself is not a limitation but merely an element of the research process. Limitations arise from the biases and blind spots a position leads to if steps to mitigate them are not taken. Aware of these biases, I assumed a critical lens in the multiple rounds of coding and translation processes and seeking comments from a peer with expertise on critical race approaches. Thus, the awareness of my positionality led me to even more meticulous critical analysis not only in theory but also in practice, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and accountable research endeavor.

5 Racialized representations of black Africans in online discussion

Through thematic analysis, this chapter will answer the research question: How do representations of black Africans in online discussion on COVID-19 cases among Africans in Guangzhou engage with race and racism?

First, a note on the thematic categories. I formulated thematic categories based on codes on three levels, which are presented in Table 2 below. Level 3 categories present distinct strands of discussion or subthemes which were formulated from roughly three to six different codes arguing around similar themes. For example, level 3 theme “insecure China” consists of three codes: “China should stop trying to please foreign countries”, “until China becomes confident, kowtowing to foreigners will continue”, and “xenophobia is a sign of feeling inferior to foreigners”. I condensed the “essence” of each strand in the form of a quote; they are not, then, direct quotes from data.

A total of 162 codes were interpreted in the dataset; the distribution of codes to themes is presented in Table 2 below. Strands of discussion that referenced black Africans in Guangzhou but did not amount to themes or did not fit with the formulated themes were omitted from analysis – these amounted to a total of 8 codes. This included 3 codes discussing areas in which black Africans reside in Guangzhou and 5 codes in which discussants were defending black Africans or in other ways pushing back on the mainstream of the discussion, for example, appeals to other netizens to not spread racist remarks. While both codes mentioned reference the research question, they did not fit in the theme of meta-discussion on racism in China as they contradict the Level 2 theme in statement form: black Africans do not face discrimination in China.

Level 2 and level 1 categories present groupings of these strands of discussion. Level 2 presents the thematic categories I interpreted from the level 3 categories, guided by the question: what are the more general characteristics the level 3 categories contribute to, argue for? Level 2 categories are presented in the form of a statement. Finally, level 1 themes present an even more general and abstract level of categorization based on level 1 categories. This level of analysis answered the question: what kinds of subjects are black Africans portrayed as?

Table 3: Representations of black Africans in online discussion

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
black Africans as social deviants 62 codes	black Africans are illegals 32 codes	“they should be dealt with”
		“hidden threat”
		“they come under false pretenses”
	black Africans misbehave 30 codes	“unable to quarantine like us”
		“they come here to be reckless”
		“we welcome them yet they dare to complain”
politicized black Africans 72 codes	black Africans present a problem for Chinese society 34 codes	“China has been in denial”
		“COVID-19 shows the truth”
		“special treatment”
		“Chinese taxpayers pay for them”
	foreign policy reasons dictate China’s treatment of black Africans 38 codes	“insecure China”
		“maintaining face disserves China”
		“China is soft because of international reputation”
		“foreigners use racism to intimidate China”
meta-discussion on racism 20 codes	black Africans do not face discrimination in China 20 codes	“not all Africans”
		“I see no color”
		“China does not have racism”

The findings of this study are presented in 4 subchapters, which present the two major themes and one minor theme were found in the data. First, I discuss *black Africans as social deviants*. This category includes conceptions of black Africans as illegal foreigners as well as essentializing statements about misbehavior and characteristics of black Africans. Next, I analyze *politicized black Africans* into two separate chapters: first, domestic issues and in internationally situated topics. Through the process of coding and analysis of the dataset, a third theme emerged, that is, a meta-discussion on racism. I distinguish this theme from the

two previous ones both on the basis of codes it corresponded to – 20 – and its different nature. This theme related to race is not one that specifically racialized black Africans or makes essentializing statements of them; rather, it grapples with the concept of racial discrimination and whether there is racism in China. This theme is discussed in chapter 5.4.

5.1 Illegal and misbehaving black Africans

The most prominent theme consists of us-them distinctions made through essentializing statements referring to Africans as social deviants of some kind. Two distinct subthemes interpreted in the dataset had to do with Africans as illegal migrants and Africans as misbehaving subjects either because of their actions or attitudes, in short, “troublemakers”.

5.1.1 Illegals hiding in Guangzhou

A major theme interpreted in the dataset deems black Africans as *illegal*. Many discussants make a direct connection between black Africans in Guangzhou and irregular immigration: although the original topic of discussion had to do with imported COVID-19 infections among African nationals in Guangzhou, discussants repeatedly direct their arguments to “illegal foreigners”, often using the word *sanfei* (三非, “three illegals”, which refers to illegal entry, residence, and work).

Discussants question the official statement referring to 4,553 people representing the entirety of the African population in the city. Exaggerated numbers of up to 200,000 African residents living in Guangzhou are reproduced alongside the claim that of these people only 14,000 individuals would have proper documentation. Furthermore, discussants make the assumption that becoming an irregular immigrant is a choice, even a strategy of black Africans in Guangzhou. Multiple discussants refer to black Africans tearing up their passports once they have arrived in China as proof of intent to stay in the country as *sanfei*.

他们官方不说在广州的黑人一共只有三千多人么？怎么检测了四千多人？真遇到“黑鬼”了？

Didn't they officially say that there are only more than 3,000 black people in Guangzhou? How come more than 4,000 people were tested? Did you come across some “black ghosts”?

一上来黑人小哥就说自己是中国人，很多黑人还准备在广州扎根去中国女人生孩子，JC根本无可奈何。

When black little brothers arrive, they often claim to be Chinese, and many plan to settle in Guangzhou, marry Chinese women, and have children. The police are virtually powerless.

有些黑人落地就撕护照，你都不知道往哪遣送。说到底入境的时候就应该留好虹膜、指纹信息登记好，现在这么多三非你可咋办？

Some black people tear up their passports as soon as they land, and you don't even know where to deport them. When entering the country, iris and fingerprint information should be registered. Now, with so many *sanfeis*, what can you do?

Many share the idea of the surge in COVID-19 cases as a turning point in what is perceived as ineffective management of black Africans. COVID-19 presents, then, not only a public health threat, but also an opportunity to crack down on “*sanfeis*” and enact stricter controls on immigrants residing in China. Many discussants call for harsh punishments of for *sanfeis*. Frequently, these calls include deportation and a ban on re-entering China. Moreover, many discussants do not refrain from using violent language such as “bury them in a pit” or referring to throwing “*sanfeis*” into the sea.

多年的广州三非黑人问题终于能够有效解决了。（一）。平时要搞排查，对于基层来说是一件吃力不讨好的事。但是现在新冠来了，你想不排查也得去查了。

The years-long problem of *sanfei* black people in Guangzhou is finally being effectively addressed. (—). Conducting inspections on them during normal times is a challenging and thankless task for grassroots authorities. However, with the arrival of the new coronavirus, inspections become inevitable.

哪儿有那么麻烦？我们能用十天时间建成两个医院。就能用十天时间建成两个收容所。给所有拿不出护照的、签证过期超三个月的尼哥。直接安排包吃包住劳动教育。有一个抓一个有两个抓两个。不说哪里来的就一直关到死说出哪里来的直接原地遣返终生不得再次入境。

Where is the trouble? We can build two hospitals in ten days, so we could build two detention centers in ten days. We will directly arrange food packages for all [n-word]s who cannot present their passports or whose visas have expired for more than three months. Provide them with meals and accommodation, implement labor education. Arrest one if there's one, arrest two if there are two. If they don't tell where they are from, keep them detained until death. Those who reveal their origin will be repatriated on the spot, and they are banned for life from re-entering.

没护照自己登记是哪个国家的，治疗完给他们包飞机轮船送回去。给两个月房租两个月伙食费，算是一点人道主义，以后不许回来了。结婚的可以留下。不说是哪国人的，挖坑埋了。

If you don't have a passport, you can register which country you are from, after treatment, they will charter a plane and ship to send you back. Give [them] two months' rent and two months' food expenses, consider it a bit of humanitarianism, but [they] won't be allowed to come back in the future. Married ones can stay. If they don't disclose their nationality, bury them in a pit.

不配合就直接驱逐出境，既然你是没有证件的三非，那么碧波荡漾的公海最适合你。

If you don't cooperate, you will be directly expelled from the country. Since you are a *sanfei* without documents, the sparkling high seas are most suitable for you.

看看菲律宾，只要你违反了禁令，枪子儿就在那里等着你。在看看美帝，有国家不愿让本国公民离美回国的直接实施签证制裁。再看看我们。

Take a look at the Philippines, if you violate the [covid] ban, a gun is waiting for you. Look at the United States empire, there are countries unwilling to let their own citizens come from the US and visa sanctions were implemented on them. And look at us.

As discussed in chapter 2.2.4, the concept of *sanfei* is racialized to the extent that it refers to nearly exclusively to black Africans (Haugen & Huang 2023, Huang 2020); this generalization is, then, hardly surprising. The institutionalization of migrant control through legislation and institutions over the past decade has led to an increasingly hostile environment for irregular immigrants; not only this, but the residence registration system further blurred boundaries between “legal” and “illegal” migrants, which made irregularization increasingly easy for many migrants, and specifically black Africans due to the type of visa they tend to enter the country with. Official campaigns calling for citizens to report on undocumented residents have likely further strengthened a view of black Africans as undocumented migrants. This combined with the authorities' refusal to publish accurate, official data regarding the number of African residents in Guangzhou on a regular basis likely presents another contributing factor flaming doubt and distrust.

Notably, news of detected infections is interpreted as a sign of lawlessness among the black African population both in the contexts of immigration and in the context of COVID-19 restrictions such as social distancing and quarantining. The explanatory power of the legal status of black African immigrants goes unquestioned by discussants, as goes the correlation of being an irregular migrant and not abiding by COVID-19 restrictions. In the Chinese netizens' analysis, these merge seamlessly. *Sanfei* discourse furthermore presents a paradoxical view of Chinese authorities' capacity to control “illegal immigrants”. On the one hand, China's powerful organizing abilities and vast resources are emphasized – it is apparent

to many discussants that China could crack down on “*sanfeis*” if it wanted to yet chooses not to. On the other hand, the police are described as powerless in face of black Africans.

5.1.2 Misbehaving black Africans

The dataset includes many variations of the theme of misbehavior or bad attitude of black Africans; many texts which included this type of construction were accompanied with themes of illegality and criminalization of black Africans. Most prominently, black Africans were seen as unwilling and incapable of abiding by COVID-19 restrictions in place in the country, with some discussants comparing black Africans to other races or ethnicities. For example:

第二，在中国的日本，韩国人都会配合，因为东亚民族还是有共同性，比如戴口罩，他们能理解，隔离，他们也能理解，所以不会抗拒。但是巧克力，他们自由惯了，不能理解这种事。

第三，真正发达国家的巧克力，不会呆这里不走，来的不走大多数是第三世界的穷的人，他们来这里享受好环境，是不可能离开，而来自穷的地方，也决定了，素质不会高，因为穷的地方教育跟不上，也不会守规则，不懂文明社会的规律是什么。都是宣扬个性。来广州从事也都是贸易批发，还是低端产品的。都是宣扬个性。

Second, citizens from Japan and South Korea in China can cooperate because East Asian ethnicities share commonalities. For example, wearing masks and understanding isolation measures are things they can comprehend. However, chocolates, used to more freedom, cannot understand such measures.

Third, chocolates from truly developed countries will not stay here if they come, and the majority of those staying after coming are poor people from third world countries, they come here to enjoy a good environment, so it is impossible for them to leave. Being from poor places also determines that their quality (*suzhi*) won't be high, as education in poor regions lags behind, and they do not adhere to rules. They all promote individualism.

Some discussants frame this view in somewhat more positive terms, as black Africans being more sociable. For example, this respondent uses the phrase “loving freedom” (爱好自由), yet at the same time proposes “honesty” (老实) as a contrasting characteristic of white and Asian (“yellow”) people:

我最近看了一些新闻，说美国黑人确诊和死亡比例都远超白人。比如说芝加哥，新冠死亡的70%是黑人，但芝加哥黑人人口只有32.4%。我想这大概和黑人生活习惯有关，因为他们爱好自由，不愿意居家隔离，到处跑，玩乐。白人和黄种人相对老实一点，更会选择居家隔离。如果真的是这样，那希望在广东的各位尽量离黑人远一点，这可不是闹着玩的。

Recently, I've seen some news saying that the proportion of confirmed cases and deaths among black people in the United States far exceeds that of white people. For example, in Chicago, 70% of COVID-19 deaths are black, while the black population in Chicago is only 32.4%. I think this might be related to the lifestyle habits of black people because they love freedom, are unwilling to stay at home, and prefer to go out and have fun. White and yellow people are relatively more honest and tend to choose home isolation.

Apart from statements that directly referenced COVID-19, a perception of a more generalized unruly or uncontrollable nature of black Africans is expressed in several responses. These perceptions are often written in the form of anecdotes, and they further position black Africans as social deviants. Black Africans are characterized as reckless, loud, ungrateful, arrogant, and lacking hygiene. Use of social media is mentioned, and this habit too entails negative connotations of “intentionally spreading negative narratives” of China. Notably, it was through social media reports by local black Africans that made the news of targeted measures reach outsiders.

感觉这些非洲籍人士来到了神州大地，就像来了自由世界一样

It feels like these Africans have come to the Divine land [of China] and act as if they are in the free world.

黑人在推特上故意抹黑中国，说：中国人歧视他们，不给他们居住，不给他们进商场买东西，还扣押他们的护照

Black individuals on Twitter intentionally spread negative narratives about China, claiming that Chinese people discriminate against them, deny them accommodation, prevent them from entering shopping malls, and confiscate their passports.

他们小区本来有很多黑人，但是因为那些人天天在电梯里尿尿，而且广州的这种天气还不洗澡，所以臭味熏天，大家都受不了，尤其清洁阿姨特别难受.....

There were many black people in their community, but because these people urinated in the elevators every day, and although Guangzhou's weather is like it is, they didn't bathe, causing an unbearable stench. Especially the cleaning aunties were very uncomfortable.....

Sexual promiscuity, too, constitutes a part of this narrative, but not a prominent one. Only a few discussants mention black Africans all day thinking about hookups (整天想着 YP) or “ezgirls” (“easy girls”, referring to Chinese women who have sexual relations with black Africans) complicating the tracing of COVID-19 cases related to black Africans. This lack of emphasis is interesting given that existing literature has described a distinctly sexualizing and

gendered discourse in constructions of black Africans. In this vein, an analysis conducted during the pandemic by Liu, Xu and Chen (2021) recognized discourse which sexualized black Africans and specifically black African men on Weibo.

In general, the coded texts under this theme include notably more slurs in comparison to the other categories – for example, statements saying that black genes are unwanted in China or calling black Africans a disease. One could characterize these statements as “classical racist” as opposed to “new racism” which alludes to supposed “cultural” differences rather than essentialized, corporeal statements. Furthermore, these types of replies tended to be shorter in length, resembling comments rather than the “informative essays” characteristic to Zhihu as a platform.

5.2 Black Africans as a domestic other

This subchapter discusses the theme of black Africans as a domestic other. This subtheme is a minor one compared to the more internationally oriented one, which will be discussed in chapter 5.3. In this subchapter, black Africans are seen as a societal problem for China. This is divided into two topics: one which argues that both the Chinese authorities and some Chinese people have been “in denial” about the problem posed by black Africans; the other one discusses black Africans as a strain on Chinese society through using its resources.

The messages are directed both at Chinese authorities and other Chinese people who have been “soft” on black Africans. Specifically, this softness is located in the bones: the word 软骨病, literally “soft bones disease” is used metaphorically. Those with soft bones are construed as naïve; they have been in denial or laughably hopeful about the threat black Africans pose to Chinese people. As briefly noted in the topic of black Africans as illegals, the texts coded under this theme, sometimes discuss the COVID-19 virus as an agent in its own right. The virus either reveals what has been a problem for a long time, or in some cases even is described as healing Guangzhou of black Africans. “The people” have known all along, but they have not been listened to:

平时不好好擦干净屁股。日积月累，藏污纳垢。现在得用大铁铲子才能铲干净。不铲害不行，还会化脓，感染恶化，会要你的命。老百姓喊了多少年了？都没用。

Usually not wiping one’s butt properly. Over time, filth accumulates, and now you need a big shovel to clean it. Not shoveling the damage is not an option, it

will fester, worsen the infection, and could cost your life. For how many years have the people been shouting [about this]? All for no effect.

新冠能让头铁的懂王都服软。但是却治不好某些人面对黑叔叔时的软骨病。治疗广州的三非黑人光靠核酸试剂和酒店隔离是不够的，关键得补钙。

COVID-19 can make even the most stubborn submit. However, it cannot cure the spinelessness that some people exhibit when facing black uncles. To treat the sanfeis of Guangzhou requires more than just nucleic acid tests and hotel isolation; the key is to supplement with calcium.

Some discussants refer to the discussion on black people being restricted, presumably through censorship. This perception contrasts with what reports and studies tell: though slurs may be triggers for censorship (Gu & Ho 2023), anti-black content is rife across major social media platforms (e.g., Pfafman et al. 2015, Human Rights Watch 2023). Nevertheless, black Africans are construed as a forbidden topic.

最担心接下来看到熟悉的套路 1.确诊上升到几千 2.卫健委官员被免职 3. 控评不提黑人 4. 全国支援广州 5. 提黑人的都被训诫

Most worried about seeing the familiar routine next: 1. Confirmed cases rise to several thousand. 2. Health Commission officials are dismissed. 3. Controlled discussion avoids mentioning black people. 4. Nationwide support for Guangzhou. 5. Those mentioning black people are reprimanded.

现在弄得来了一堆废柴的黑白灰绿，好事没多少烂事折腾了一大帮，高位的肉食者花了国家大把的钱还捞不着好名声，弄得自己人也不待见。现在里里外外都是拿这些烂事黑你的

Now we have a bunch of useless blacks, whites, grays, and greens. There hasn't been much good, but they've stirred up a big mess. The higher-up meat-eaters spent a lot of the country's money and still can't get a good reputation, making even their own people dislike them. Now, both inside and outside, people are using these bad things against you

A less ubiquitous, yet nevertheless observable subtheme consisted of netizens who are convinced black Africans receive preferential treatment from Chinese authorities. Some discussants referred to the COVID-19 cases and specifically the official quoted in the original post, who stated that China does not discriminate against any specific group but applies public health measures to all equally.

There were many ways to oppose this official's statement. Some Chinese netizens felt foreigners should not be treated the same as Chinese citizens in the first place – a sort of “China first” mentality with immigrants not counted as part of the country. Some felt that in

principle, everyone should be treated the same but in practice, this does not happen. A common thread through these statements is a sense of black Africans receiving services that Chinese people have not received. Overall, discussants felt that resources spent on black Africans should be spent on poor Chinese people.

我们有中国国籍，有广州某区公安局核发的身份证的人，站在广州的地皮上，呼吁请平等对待我们。这本身就很悲哀很滑稽！为什么我们要对外国人高看一眼？

We are Chinese citizens, holding ID cards issued by a certain district's public security bureau in Guangzhou, standing on the land of Guangzhou, and we appeal for equal treatment. This itself is very sad and ridiculous! Why should we look up to foreigners?

从湖北到南京都要隔离 14 天，黑人至少要 28 天起步才够，所有的居住检测治疗费用全部自理，我们的社保和福利只服务国人，不包括你们这些高贵的“黑皮肤外宾”。

From Hubei to Nanjing, everyone must be quarantined for 14 days, but black people need at least 28 days to start, and all the costs of residence, testing, and treatment should be self-funded. Our social security and welfare only serve the Chinese people and do not include you noble “black-skinned foreign guests”.

我国自己都穷得揭不开锅了，2000 万贫困户还没彻底脱贫，实在养不活非法入境的非洲兄弟，谢谢，谢谢。

Our country is struggling financially, with 20 million impoverished households not completely lifted out of poverty. We simply cannot afford to support our African brothers who enter illegally, thank you.

Arguably, the perception of black Africans as a domestic other has a political subtext. Rather than commenting the perceived characteristics of black Africans or their purported behavior, the discussion points to anxiety over resource allocation in Chinese society, further revealing a view of this happening through zero sum game with winners and losers. This further complicates the views presented in the discussion which allude to state capacity.

5.3 Black Africans as a tool of diplomacy

The third subtheme under politicized black Africans broadens the outlook to international relations and China's self-expected role in it. This is the most prominent subtheme with 32 codes attributed to it. This subtheme is in direct relationship with the subthemes “Chinese authorities have given black Africans preferential treatment” and “Criticism of black Africans has been denied”. In the narrative presented in the dataset, Chinese authorities intentionally

restrain from taking appropriate actions against black Africans and do this for the sake of keeping up appearances – this, in turn, disservices the Chinese.

用超国民待遇讨好外国人，指望改善国外对中国的负面印象

只是抱薪救火

薪不尽火不灭

更可悲的是，我们是薪

Use super-national treatment to please foreigners, hope to improve foreign countries' negative impression of China

[it's like] carrying firewood to put out the fire

but if the firewood is not exhausted, the fire will never be extinguished

what's even more sad is that we are the firewood.

One author criticizes the preferential treatment, or "super-national treatment," accorded to foreigners in China as a futile attempt to improve China's negative image abroad. The message seems to reference the essay "Six Kingdoms" by Su Xun, where trying to extinguish a fire with firewood only fuels it further, implying that such policies may ultimately be self-defeating. The poignant lament that the Chinese themselves are the "firewood" suggests a self-sacrificial aspect of these policies, with the potential to harm the interests of the Chinese populace.

我国对国际形象一向比较重视，同时在非洲的投资也是海外战略的重点。欧美一直以来的观点就是污蔑我们在搞殖民，试图挑拨中非关系。现在外网各种带节奏说广东在搞种族歧视，让外商流落街头。非洲联盟也在各种抗议，可以预想的是如果处理不好搞出什么幺蛾子，很容易被国际孤立（美国国务卿相信已经磨刀霍霍）。反种族歧视是西方的政治正确，这点必须意识到。哪怕我们正规的防疫措施也会被有心人泼一盆脏水上去。所以今天政府也在各种召见非洲大使，表达公平对待和反歧视的原则。

Our country has always attached importance to its international image, and its investment in Africa is also a key focus of its overseas strategy. The viewpoints of Europe and America have always been to slander us for engaging in colonization and attempt to sow discord in Sino-African relations. Now, various voices on the foreign internet are stirring up claims of racial discrimination in Guangdong, causing foreign businessmen to be stranded on the streets. The African Union is also protesting in various ways. It can be anticipated that if mishandled, there may be some unforeseen circumstances, making international isolation highly probable (the U.S. Secretary of State is likely sharpening his knives). Anti-racial discrimination is political correctness in the West, and this must be recognized.

Even our legitimate epidemic prevention measures may be maliciously criticized. Therefore, today the government is convening various African ambassadors to express the principles of fair treatment and anti-discrimination.

这能有啥办法？非洲籍人士端着“种族歧视”这个金饭碗，满世界伸手要福利，以后还可能要权力。

What can be done about this? African nationals wield the golden golden rice bowl of "racial discrimination," reaching out their hands across the world, asking for welfare benefits, and potentially seeking power in the future.

This upkeep of reputation includes China making concessions to black Africans in Guangzhou to convince Western and African countries that China does not discriminate people on the basis of race. Furthermore, anti-racism is weaponized by foreign entities – including African individuals, foreign governments, and media outlets – as an unfair accusation against China, and as a cunning strategy to hinder China from pursuing its interests. Interestingly, in the message above, Africans are described in the same sentence as asking for welfare benefits *and* potentially seeking power in the future. The “golden rice bowl of racial discrimination”, referring to a sort of holy grail or lucrative source of income, is a direct reference to accusations of racism benefiting black Africans. Notably, no messages consider the economic or other benefits that black Africans bring to China. This is reminiscent of what Cheng (2019) describes as the persistent belief that China is “giving out aid” to “poor Africa” and getting nothing in return. In this imaginary, it is precisely China that allows black Africans to migrate within its borders out of sheer good will or reasons of seeming open to international friends.

外国人大声训斥我们中国人？？如果我们对外所展示的善良，包容 最后却让我们国人受尽委屈，那是一件很可悲的事情。

Foreigners loudly reprimanding us Chinese?? If the kindness and inclusiveness we display to the outside world result in injustice to our fellow countrymen, it is a very sad thing.

Answers include relatively knowledgeable references to the African Union as well as Chinese arms exports to African countries. Interestingly, Nigeria is singled out as an African actor. Nigeria being the most populous country in Africa, this is not very surprising per se, but no other countries are mentioned explicitly in the dataset whereas Nigeria gets multiple mentions. This could be related to recent social media “incidents” involving specifically Nigerian individuals: for example, the case of a male patient assaulting a nurse in early April, and a group of Nigerians reportedly going out to eat at a restaurant, ignoring quarantine

regulations (Castillo 2021a, 151). Interestingly, the foreign entities are not the primary cause of complaint. More answers are pointed at China displaying weakness towards the world rather than foreign entities – whether Western countries or media outlets, or African governments – acting unfairly. For example:

根本在于对外软弱无比。

尼日利亚，稍微了解一下地缘政治今年都可能因为人口爆炸粮食危机玩完。就这我们堂堂蓝星第二大国，放豪言怼灯塔的国家因为他们外交部的抗议怂了。

The crux of this is [China's] extreme weakness in dealing with external matters.

Nigeria, with a bit of understanding of geopolitical issues, is possibly facing a food crisis this year due to population explosion. So our mighty second-largest nation on the Blue Star [China] who made bold statements against and challenged the lighthouse nation [the US] backed down in the face of protests from their foreign affairs department.

非洲人是不会停止 bb 的。然后广州就可以想怎么搞就怎么搞了。这时候不扩军，更待何时？要是中国有能开到非洲的轰炸机，断不是现在这种情况。尼日利亚作为黑非洲经济仅次于南非的第二。我总觉得今年会上演一个剧本，疫情对于今年的尼日利亚来说只是开胃小菜。真正的考验在粮食，非洲蝗灾加上今年几乎一定会出现的粮食减产。

Africans will never stop bb [making noise; whining]. Then Guangzhou can do whatever it wants. If we don't expand our military now, for how much longer will we wait? If China had bombers that could fly to Africa, this would not be the case now. Nigeria is the second largest economy in black Africa after South Africa. I always feel that a script will play out this year, and the epidemic is just an appetizer for Nigeria this year. The real test is food. The locust plague in Africa plus the almost certain reduction in food production this year.

Two contextual factors likely explain the prominence of this current in the discussion. Importantly, at the time of discussion, African diplomats had responded to reports on discriminatory measures being carried out. The response could be characterized as unusually strong, with the African Union as multilateral fora taking a stance over racial issues alongside individual ambassadors. The involvement of the African Union is remarkable because generally African governments and officials have been reluctant to stand up for their citizens abroad (Visser & Cezne 2023, 14). These diplomatic incidents likely inflamed the political dimensions Chinese netizens saw in the treatment of black Africans in Guangzhou. Furthermore, the relatively high proportion of responses alluding to geopolitics as well as details presented in arguments may be due to the platform's profile and clientele - Zhihu

being a platform for the relatively educated middle class from 1st and 2nd tier cities (Ifeng 2021) which hosts long debates on political topics (Zhang 2020), as discussed in subchapter 4.2 on Zhihu.

5.4 Meta-discussion on racism

A minor theme interpreted in the dataset had to do with meta-discussion concerning racism. Notably, the discussion departs from other themes in that it does not make statements of Africans in China themselves. Rather, the coded texts under are aware of race and racism and discuss the phenomenon – mostly through disclaiming the existence of racism. What unites the statements in this category is the offering of alternative frames to race and racism, while perpetuating racism.

Many statements closely resemble what Jiwani and Richardson (2011, 45) call *apparent disclaimers*, aimed to distance the speaker from racism and present them as reasonable critics. Interestingly, some of these statements disclaiming racism still include racial slurs. For instance, misbehaving and unlawful black Africans are contrasted to “respected” black people, such as the Director-General of the World Health Organization Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus; thus, the author supposedly not being racist. Likewise, racism is located in the United States and the black liberation movement, with an author referencing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s speech *I have a Dream*.

让人尊敬的黑人很多，谭干事，科比等等。但这些不守规矩，整天想着YP，作奸犯科，死皮赖脸的黑人，我只想和他们说，呸屎啦，尼个！

There are many respected black individuals, such as Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Kobe, and so on. But these unruly black people, who think about hook-ups all day long, violate the law and commit crimes, and are shamelessly causing trouble, I just want to say to them, go to hell, [n-word]!”

-- 咱们中国人根本就没有种族歧视这个概念，这个概念还是从高中语文课文《我有一个梦想》这篇伟大的演讲里得知的。

-- we Chinese people simply don't have the concept of racial discrimination. This concept was only learned from the great speech "I Have a Dream" in a high school Chinese class.

Furthermore, some discussants set integration or assimilation as an imaginary condition for the acceptance of black Africans. Far from demanding fluent Mandarin Chinese, the author quoted below saw the participation in a 996 culture as quintessentially Chinese, while idealizing immigrants who achieve integration through enterprise.

我并不排斥黑人群体在中国的居住，甚至有些欢迎，前提是他们完全融入中国的文化。譬如如果他们的日常生活是这样的：黑叔叔带着小黑周末上辅导班，黑叔叔在公司 996，小黑在家写作业。小黑偷偷玩王者荣耀上分被黑妈妈打了一顿。黑妈妈每天兼职工作，跟黑爸爸商量着买五环第二套学区房。

Lastly, I want to emphasize that I don't oppose the residence of black individuals in China; in fact, some are welcome, provided they fully integrate into our country's culture. For example, if their daily life resembles this: Uncle Black takes Little Black to weekend tutoring, Uncle Black works 996 in the company, and Little Black does homework at home. Little Black secretly plays mobile games and gets scolded by Black Mom. Black Mom works part-time every day and discusses with Black Dad about buying a second home in the Five Rings school district.

In theory, according to these statements, black Africans could become part of Chinese society, if they worked like everyone else and “fully integrated”, sharing Chinese people’s aspirations and customs. However, the statements include the insinuation that in practice, this is not the case; that the actual black Africans in Guangzhou do not fulfill these requirements. In the end, the message seems to be: if they were like us, they could be treated like ones – but they are not. Thus, us-them distinctions are, in the end, fortified.

6 Conclusions and discussion

This study finds a thematically diverse, yet consistently othering portrayal of black Africans in Chinese online discussion, which entails complex and in parts contradicting representations of black Africans in China. Through the two dimensions of racialization found in the analysis, netizens represent black Africans as social deviants, *essentially different* to Chinese people based on legal status/mobility patterns, behavior, and attitudes, as well as *politicized subjects* who, in Chinese netizens' imaginaries, serve as conduits for broader political themes, both domestically within the PRC and in the international arena. Black Africans are construed as culturally and corporeally *inferior*, mainly in contrast to qualities such as rationality and (self-)control. This is apparent in the prominence of the theme of illegality, as well as the high proportion of essentializing statements alluding to black people's perceived inability and/or unwillingness to abide by pandemic regulation. At the same time, black Africans are portrayed as a privileged "group" within China, with netizens construing black Africans as recipients of benefits which they do not deserve. This alludes to an undeserved *superior* societal status in China.

The third and final theme found in the analysis was minor compared to the previous two and different in its orientation. Chinese netizens engage in meta-discourse on racism, in which it is overwhelmingly argued that black Africans do not face discrimination in China. The meta-discussion on racism emerges in a context in which issues of race are discussed extensively in Chinese online discussions, as shown by for example Pfafman et al. (2015), and Africa-China-relations specifically are highly mediatized, as noted in the literature review. Thus, the results of this of this study further undermine the insistent defense against examinations of race and racism in China referring to the "ignorance" of the Chinese or the overall lack of salience race has in China.

Interestingly, the gendered dimension of Chinese perceptions of black Africans recognized in many studies, also in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (Liu et al. 2021), is not pronounced in the results. Rather, it is issues related to international relations that are prominent. The findings of this study differ in this regard from most earlier studies on the topic. The prominence of geopolitics not entirely surprising, given that Zhihu as a platform has been recognized as hosting extensive debates on political issues, and a platform whose clientele consists of largely middle-class, relatively well-educated Chinese urbanites of 1st and 2nd tier cities (Ifeng 2021).

The findings of this study largely support existing literature on Chinese representations of black Africans. The findings are particularly similar to Gu and Ho's (2023) observations of anti-black sentiments on Weibo, in which users made use of a nomination strategy featuring both arguments for the inferiority and superiority of black people. As Qiu (2021) points out, after Mao-era proclamations of friendship and hosting of African guests, black Africans residing in China were never "normalized" as an issue. Rather, they clearly remain a subject of much contention and politicization. The distinction between essentializing statements and broader political themes is similar to findings of Ang and Martin (2024), who sketch a distinction between a broader geopolitical focus and corporeal focus in their examination of Zhihu users' racialization of white Westerners during the pandemic. Their study, also analyzing a dataset from Zhihu, provides an especially interesting comparison to the study at hand. They found that messages which explicitly racialized white Westerners in terms of essentializing statement about their body or behavior amounted only to a less prominent theme they termed "emerging", whereas the messages with politics-oriented themes were more prominent (*ibid.*, 12). The thematic categorizing of this study found that essentializing statements and those related to political themes were roughly as prominent, with black Africans as social deviants corresponding to 62 codes and politicized black Africans corresponding to 72 codes. This suggests that in the case of black Africans, essentializing statements are more common than in comparison to white Westerners, who are othered more in terms of geopolitics.

The juxtaposition of this thesis with Ang & Martin's (2024) similarly designed study underscores the potential benefits of a comparative approach to better understand the nuances of racialization in China. This involves not only spatial specificities—attributes particular to the Chinese context—but also the dynamics with other global conceptions of race and racialization. While this thesis has identified such interactions, a more in-depth comparative analysis would likely yield further valuable insights. A major limitation of this thesis project is in its focus on race and racism with only references to Chinese nationalism, which has been incorporated into many contemporary analyses of race and racism in China. This linkage evident in the section detailing the historical development of a black racial other: a distinct discourse of race in China emerged in direct relation with nationalism, as race was conceptualized in national terms by reformers of the early 20th century, and the emerging of a Han supremacism in the 21st century. The incorporation of a more detailed analysis of the global right wing would have benefited this thesis.

As a final note, as the crux of this thesis project is analysis of a Mandarin Chinese social media discussion, some remarks on language skills are in order. When the idea for this research project was conceptualized for the first time in 2020, the prospect of reading through, let alone conducting analysis on textual data about race *in Chinese* loomed over my head as an enormous challenge, one that led to procrastination and, at times, a wish to switch the topic of the thesis altogether. Importantly, what gave my language skills the enormously helpful and needed push was my student exchange in Shanghai, China during the fall semester 2023. Living and functioning in a Chinese-speaking environment both online and offline, although for a relatively brief period, had enormous benefits for an intermediate Mandarin-speaker. Without extending my studies to be able to go to Shanghai, the quality of analysis I would have been able to conduct on a Chinese-language dataset would have undoubtedly been significantly weaker.

What is more, carrying out this research project inevitably led to further development in language skills. Although learning racial slurs in Mandarin cannot be described a pleasant experience, I found the engagement with a Chinese-language dataset beneficial not only for the aims and of this research project, but it enhanced my capabilities as a Mandarin-speaker and, concurrently, as an expert in the field of Chinese studies. Analyzing textual data in Mandarin Chinese was a challenge I am very glad I took up on.

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