

USE2209: Globalising Asian-Pacific Identities

A/P Barbara Ryan

Oral history

On 26th January, 2019, I conducted a 35-minute interview with my Mother, who shared with me many interesting and valuable personal memories of engaging diasporic African communities and expressions. To provide a background of my Mother, she is a Chinese lady who has been living in Nanning, China for the past forty over years. Her youth, spanning the 1980s, was accompanied by a period of rapid opening-up of China to the rest of the world, including ideas and people from diasporic African communities. Her memories range from past to present, offering us unique lenses to look at her evolving interaction with African-related ideas. Through our discussion, her words revealed to me a growing dichotomy between increasing general amity towards ethnic Africans and deepening fixity in the online world.

My first question was “In your memory, when was the earliest time you came into contact with ideas related to ethnic Africans?”. She replied, “Around the time when televisions came out. It was the first time I saw this community on TV. It was something new to us, so we felt quite curious. After all, they have different skin colours from us. I was in high school. We didn’t really have the chance to see them in real life, so all sources of information were from TV or foreign movies, and music!” This suggests that her conception of African identities was solely shaped by media portrayal in rapidly liberalising China. This might have caused her view of ethnic Africans to be stereotypical and incomplete. Given that there seems to be no history

of systematic oppression and discrimination against the Black community in China, I was wondering whether the idea of race and race-based social hierarchy was present at that time.

Thus, I probed further, “What was your initial impression of them at that time?” She answered, “I felt they were really happy and lively people. They were good at sports and music. They impressed me a lot in athletics and music, rock music.” She then continued, “Michael Jackson’s the first Black celebrity I knew. I bought all his cassettes. I listened to all of them repeatedly. Those songs were really classic, and I liked him a lot. It’s not just me. His songs accompanied our generation’s growing years. Yeah, so I thought Black people had happy vibes and were really good at music.” From her description, it seems that she and people around her at that time had a generally favourable impression of people of African descent. However, her initial impression of them abounded with superficial stereotypes, which might have arisen from glimpses of TV visuals portraying Western, or in particular, American pop culture. To her in her youth, her perception of the African identity was narrowly fixed to the TV screen and confined to only music and sports.

Then, our conversation moved on to a more distant history. I inquired, “When you think of Black people, in your impression, which countries do you think they come from?” She replied, “I think they’re all from Africa? I know there’re Americans who are Black. Hmm, a very long time ago, slaves from Africa were sold to the Americas and Europe, I think. Initially, it was a few people. Then it grew larger into... (*unsure of which term to use*) slave trade?” “How did you come to know this history?” I asked. She replied, “I’ve watched a TV series on the African slave trade and plantations. Hmm, I didn’t know this from the textbook in school though. They didn’t really teach us in history textbooks, or maybe I didn’t pay attention in class...” She then

briefly mentioned the long-standing racial discrimination against African Americans, before quickly proceeding to comment, “Nowadays, it’s much better. When you talk to them, they feel very confident and energetic. Sometimes, when I see them on the streets of Nanning or Guangzhou¹, they look very optimistic. There’s much less discrimination now. There are many famous Black politicians and celebrities.” When asked whether she knew what happened between the period of flagrant repression and our modern times, she expressed that she did not know much about the civil rights movements in the 20th century.

From the first sentence of her reply above (*“I think they’re all from Africa?”*), she still seems to tie the African diasporic identity to the continent of Africa, instead of regarding them as coming from their resident countries, despite the fact that they have lived in various countries for numerous generations. This reflects many people’s tendency to associate ethnic Africans with a blurry all-encompassing label, even if they have substantially closer cultural and political affinity to their own countries. This narrowly-binding perception is a form of fixity against the apparent fluidity in international migration. Also, the contrast she made between the tragic history and the supposed racial harmony in the present day shows that she is glad to see the progress towards a more favourable perception and social status of ethnic African communities. Interestingly, she mainly based her opinion that racism has declined on observation of outward appearances and general news, which may conceal underlying prejudices that still exist. Nevertheless, she acknowledges that racism is far from extinct, as she continued with areas that the current strive for equality has left behind.

¹ Note: there are over ten thousand African expatriates currently living in Guangzhou. My Mother frequently visits Guangzhou as we have relatives there.

“You mentioned that there’s still some ‘disharmony’ that persists in society. Could you elaborate further?” “I’ve read news like white policemen shooting Black people, things like that. Racism still exists today. From what I know, there have been protests and demonstrations in America against racism.” I then probed further, “Why do you think this phenomenon still exists? What do you think are the reasons that people discriminate against someone based on their skin colour?” She answered, “The first reason is definitely history. Many ‘malignant tumors’ stay in people’s brains. Education and social influence from a long time ago have left a big impact. For example, the mindset that some people have a higher social status and people should be divided into different classes still persists through time and remains in modern societies. Sometimes based on race. Some people still hold this idea. For example, when they walk down the street, they will be like ‘oh, a black man’, then all the judgement will come in.” This shows that she acknowledges the huge role that history plays in shaping people’s mindset, as opposed to racism as an ‘innate’ response to people of different phenotypes. It is the underlying notion of social stratification that keeps racism alive. Race is but a convenient marker used by the dominant group to impose social division and elevate its own social status. As Smedley (1998) put it, race is the “organization of all peoples into a limited number of unequal or ranked categories theoretically based on differences in their biophysical traits”. The word “ranked”, echoing “higher social status” mentioned by my Mother, denotes a socioeconomic power imbalance between races, which evidently persists until today. The underlying social factors that fuel race-based discrimination can be considered a fixity, as it traps ethnic Africans in undesirable socioeconomic circumstances that are hard to escape.

Continuing the previous discussion on racism in the US, I further inquired, “How about in China, is there discrimination against people of African descent?” She replied, “Hmm, actually, discrimination does exist, but not as severe as the West? (*uncertain*)” She continued, “Some still call them ‘black ghosts’. But as people become more educated, they’re more respectful, especially towards foreigners. I would say only a minority of people still discriminate against the Black. I don’t think people around me are racists. Just look at Nanning, nowadays many Black students come to study at Guangxi University. I don’t see many people judging them. As people become more exposed to more new things, they become more tolerant towards each other.” She then talked about her personal interaction with African students from Mauritius, “As you know, I used to open a café near Guangxi Medical University. Some Mauritian students frequented our place and we had some simple conversations. I feel they aren’t any different from other university students. They are lively and polite, willing to learn things. We discussed topics such as various kinds of coffee.” From this, we can learn that anti-African racism in China has been declining as people become more educated. People do not judge a person solely based on skin tone as much as in the past, and start to consider other parameters that define a person as well as seek to understand commonalities between different groups of people. This reflects a growing fluidity in perceiving ethnic Africans, in contrast to fitting them into mostly negative stereotypes.

“Do you think racism against ethnic Africans in China is an imported idea or an inherent one?”

“I think mass media does play a part in influencing people’s mindset. Nowadays, news reports like to portray and sensationalise negative news about Africans. They portray Black people as violent. For example, news like Black people in China engaging in robbery, rape, crimes often appear. Sometimes these incidents are unrelated to race. They’re just like any other crimes

committed by others, but people tend to associate these negative events with the Black community. Also, with messaging platforms like WeChat, people can spread sensational articles that aren't verifiable, but still manage to capture much attention, such as how African students spread AIDS to locals, things like that. They may not be true, but this deepens people's stereotypes against this group of people." This draws a palpable contrast between the diminished racist mindset that she mentioned previously, and the rise of negative stereotypes perpetuated by mass media. In theory, the rising prevalence of the Internet exposes netizens to diverse ideas and supposedly allows them to see a bigger world, thereby becoming more tolerant of each other's differences. More often, however, the Internet acts as a self-selective amplifier that feeds web users ideas that resonate with them. Mass media, especially in the form of online news outlets, capitalises on the public's fear of the unfamiliar and aggravates people's pre-existing prejudice against marginalised groups. This has apparently caused a rise of expressive hatred in the cyber world against ethnic Africans in China.

In conclusion, through this interview, my Mother has provided us with her own understanding of the people, history and social circumstances facing ethnic African communities, both past and present. At the same time, we can glean valuable insights regarding a gradual shift in people's attitudes towards diasporic Africans in China. The public's growing cultural awareness and amity towards Africans in real life unfortunately see the opposite in the cyber realm, where mass media propagates and deepens negative stereotypes among vocal netizens.

(1797 words)

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