

Historicizing Difference

Construction of Race Identity in China-Africa Relations

I. Introduction

When I give public talks about my research on the history of work in Cold War China-Africa relations, I am normally asked a specific kind of question about race. It goes something like this: “How did those [black] Africans and those [Asian] Chinese get along with one another?” I have tried for some time to deflect these questions, for I do not find that my historical sources focus as much on race as my audiences do. After some time, however, I decided that the persistence of this questioning on the part of my audience required me to take another look at the question of race and to try to think about it more deeply. I have also read some of the literature published about race in China-Africa relations and have felt that there is a missing dimension. In this binary formulation, the historical context of whiteness disappears.¹

I have noted elsewhere that the historical sources I work with are likely to reference the identities of African and Chinese actors in relationship to whiteness. For example, when Tanzanian railway workers described their experience of working with Chinese railway experts, they stated that the Chinese were “white people” (*watu weupe*) but that their behavior was very different from the behavior of the British colonialists who had until recently governed Tanganyika. “I never imagined that I would be sitting at the same dining table as a white person,” said one Tanzanian worker, describing an evening when he was invited to have dinner with his Chinese engineering instructor. Another Tanzanian described feeling astonished when he was invited to sit in the front seat of a vehicle with a Chinese driver. In the colonial period, an African would rarely be invited into the interior of a vehicle. One worker said that the British settlers would even allow their dogs to sit in the front seat of a Land Rover, while the Africans would always have to sit in the back. And the idea that the Chinese man would be the driver and the African the passenger seemed to him like a complete inversion of the colonial relationship.

¹ One author who brought China, Africa, and the “West” together in her analysis was Emma Mawdsley in, “Fu Manchu versus Dr. Livingstone in the Dark Continent: Representing China, Africa and the West in British Broadsheet Newspapers,” *Political Geography* 27 (2008): 509–529.

An earlier version of this think piece was presented at “Making Sense of the China-Africa Relationship: Theoretical Approaches and the Politics of Knowledge,” a conference held on November 18 and 19, 2013, at Yale University. Professor Monson would like to thank Jane Rhodes, Lan Shanshan, and Tu Huynh for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

These memories from the experience of railway building suggest to me that stories about the Chinese experts were not only about “Chineseness” but also about the earlier racialized experience of British colonialism. The comparative nature of the account references both past and present. The story about driving in the Land Rover with the Chinese expert was implicitly also a story about the white settler. Thus, the way these historical actors talked about race was not binary but triangular, constructed in a complex and historically specific narrative structure.

Documentary records from the colonial period in Africa and from more recent decades in China also illustrate the ways that race discourses were triangular. In the early twentieth century in the British colony of the Gold Coast and in the Transvaal, public debates about bringing Chinese laborers to work in the gold mines made explicit comparisons (in different ways) between Africans, Asians, and Europeans. And in the student conflicts in Nanjing in the late 1980s, grievances raised by Chinese students had to do with the differences (as well as some similarities) between African foreign students and those identified as white.² Discourse about Africans was therefore not only about what it meant to be Chinese or African in Nanjing in the 1980s, but also about what it meant to be “foreign.”

As I have been developing my own thinking about the triangulation of race identity in China-Africa relations, I have found the insights of Claire Jean Kim in her 1999

² B. Sautman, “Anti-Black Racism in Post-Mao China,” *The China Quarterly*, no. 138 (1994): 413–437.

article on the racial triangulation of Asian Americans to be extremely helpful. In this paper, I would like to summarize some of Kim’s arguments and use them to begin to make sense of the historical triangulation of race in China and Africa.

At the time that Kim was writing in 1999, race theorists in the United States were also trying to go beyond a binary frame of analysis, in their case the binary of “black” and “white.” As they endeavored to broaden the categories of investigation to include a greater diversity of racial experience, scholars made one of two moves: they either wrote about parallel processes of racialization as independent trajectories or they focused on a racial hierarchy in which racial groups occupied different steps on a scale of status and privilege. The problem with the separate trajectory approach, Kim argued, was that it “imputes mutual autonomy to respective racialization processes that are in fact mutually constitutive of one another.”³ In fact, these groups were not historically racialized in isolation, without reference to the others: “Asian Americans have been racialized relative to and through interaction with Whites and Blacks.”⁴

Kim proposed that the best way to understand this process was by understanding race as co-constituted and negotiated within a historically specific “field of racial positions.” Thus, groups

³ C. J. Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” *Politics and Society* 27, no. 1 (1999): 105–138. See also C. J. Kim, “Imagining Race and Nation in Multiculturalist America,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27, no. 6 (2004): 987–1005.

⁴ Kim, “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” 105–138.

become racialized in comparison with one another, and are at the same time “differently racialized.” She went further to argue that the process of race triangulation takes place through two distinct but related processes. Within a context of white dominance, Black Americans and Asian Americans are ranked hierarchically within a field of racial positions in what she calls “relative valorization.” At the same time, processes of “civic ostracism” constructed Asian Americans as foreign and unassimilable. Therefore, both race as hierarchical valorization and race as “foreign otherness” intersected in historically constituted and negotiated ways.

I believe that the concept of race triangulation can be a useful one for understanding racialization in the field of China-Africa relations. In this field, there are race discourses that are related to hierarchy or “relative valorization” as group identities are formed in relationship to one another. At the same time, because of the inherently transnational nature of engagements between Africans and Chinese (including imaginaries of belonging or exclusion), the question of who is “foreign” is also a powerful element. Both of these components of race discourse—hierarchy and citizenship—are constructed in a field of racial positions that includes whiteness. Yet as I hope to show here, whiteness as a discursive category within these racialization processes is rarely addressed by scholars. The racialization of the “West” as white in these narratives has also remained largely unexamined, although I will not have the space to delve into that question here.

The contexts of race in the United States and in the transnational settings of China and Africa are, of course, not the same. Yet not only does Kim’s theory prove useful, as I hope to show here, but many of the racial ideas that have informed the racialization of Asian Americans and Black Americans bear similarities to racial ideas that are present in China-Africa historical engagement. The place of whiteness as a category of status and privilege—and of political and/or economic dominance, depending on the context—is also a part of the historical background within which these processes take place.

And it is historical background, particularly for Africa but also for global processes more generally, that I also hope to touch on here. For many of these racializing processes have colonial pasts that link them in important ways.

II. Race Thinking

If my audiences are a trustworthy indicator, then there is considerable interest in the racial dimension of the relationships between the Chinese and Africans who encounter one another in China-Africa engagement, both historically and presently. Yet there has been surprisingly little scholarship that has focused on this topic. Those authors that have published articles on the theme of race (most notably Barry Sautman and Cheng Yinghong) have focused on “racism” and have primarily considered racial views of Africans held by Chinese.⁵ And while they both reference

⁵Y. Cheng, “From Campus Racism to Cyber Racism: Discourse of Race and Chinese Nationalism,” *The*

the literature on the historical construction of racial identity in China (most often the work of Frank Dikötter), they have not situated their studies more broadly in the field of global race studies. Yet “racism” is only one of many possible forms of racial thought. And a focus on racism as incident, rather than on racialization as process, may even obscure the ways that race thinking has been historically constructed. In his new work on the history of race thinking in Zanzibar, Jonathan Glassman writes against the trend in African studies that attributes race differentiation to colonialism and to Western forms of race categorization. As such, his work not only provides a useful analysis of race thinking among Africans themselves in historical context but also provides helpful theoretical background for understanding the ways that race identities have been constructed in sites of African, Asian, and European historical engagement.⁶

Glassman’s work also allows us to see the relationship between race and national identity in a way that may help us to go beyond the customary conflation of “Africanness” with “blackness” and “Chineseness” with “Asianness” (or, occasionally, “yellowness”) that requires careful historicization. This is a common approach not only in media and popular discourses but also in scholarly works. For example, in his new article on racism and Chinese nationalism, Cheng Yinghong

conflates African identity with race identity at the start of his article, writing in one sentence about “anti-African racism” and in another about “presumed black racial inferiority.” While he later provides a much more nuanced and helpful understanding of the relationship between race, ethnicity, and nation (for Chinese nationalism), from the outset Cheng racializes Africans as black.⁷ In most of the literature on China-Africa relations, similarly, “African” and “black” are used interchangeably not only in the sources but also by scholars and journalists.

What Glassman’s work (on African racial thought) and Cheng’s work (on Chinese nationalism) show us is that race history is in essence a “history of meanings” that are produced in dynamic contexts of political, economic, and social relations. And there is a reason why it can be difficult to untangle the “racial” from the ethnic or national components of race thinking: the language of race, like the language of ethnicity and nation, is based on ideas of common ancestry or descent.⁸ Therefore, because race thinking defines collective understandings of common traditions or inherited characteristics, “forms of ethnic and national thought can be invested with racial meanings” and vice versa. As Ann Stoler has also argued, it is therefore no coincidence when ethnic identity,

China Quarterly 207 (2011): 561–579; B. Sautman, “Anti-Black Racism in Post-Mao China.”

⁶ See also J. Glassman, “Slower Than a Massacre: The Multiple Sources of Racial Thought in Colonial Africa,” *American Historical Review* 109 (2004): 720–754.

⁷ It may be that Cheng is reflecting the views of his own research subjects here; about the relationship between research and race discourse, see below.

⁸ Cheng, p. 576, also citing B. Sautman, “Peking Man and the Politics of Paleoanthropological Nationalism in China,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 1 (2001): 96; see also F. Dikötter, “Group Definition and the Idea of Race in Modern China,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 13, no. 3 (1990).

nationalisms, and racialization converge—to differentiate them would be to misunderstand their deployment by historical actors in fields of negotiation.⁹ The challenge for scholars of identity in Africa-China engagement, then, is to investigate more explicitly the processes of racialization through which individuals, communities, and nations construct and deploy their discourses of sameness and difference. As the face of Africa-China relations shifts over time and space (physically and metaphorically), this ongoing racialization must be understood to be a situational, contingent, and unstable process. It must also be carefully situated in historical contexts, including those of colonialism and postcolonialism. And finally, this discourse must go beyond the binary categories of “Africanness” and “Chineseness” to include other identities, in particular the category “whiteness.”

III. Beyond Binaries

Scholars of Africa-China relations have already done much to disassemble the binary racialized frameworks through which this field has been framed. Yoon Jung Park’s work in particular has demonstrated the complexity and diversity of Chinese and African identity in South Africa as well as the lessons this case offers more broadly (despite the persistence of South African

“exceptionalism”). We now know for example that there are many different “Chinese” involved in Africa whether we are looking at larger-scale institutions and enterprises or at smaller-scale actors.¹⁰

Judith Zoetelief wrote in her MA thesis at the University of Leiden that she was disconcerted when she arrived in Tamale, Ghana, to do research interviews with the “new Chinese migrants” she had been told were resident there. In the end, she found that the “Chinese” people mentioned were in fact Japanese aid workers, German doctors of Chinese descent, and Korean construction workers building a gas pipeline.¹¹ Zoetelief’s experience reminds us not only that “Chineseness” is a constructed category but that it is important to carefully understand the specific ways in which local people understand Chineseness in context (the same is true for Africans in China)—for example, a European woman journalist traveling in Eritrea was also identified as “Chinese” because of her activities and the social spaces that she frequented.¹²

IV. Race Triangulation and Unexamined Whiteness

It is not difficult to find examples of the triangulation of African, Chinese, and

⁹ A. Stoler, “Racial Histories and Their Regimes of Truth,” *Political Power and Social Theory* 11 (1997): 183–206; M. Loveman, “Is Race Essential?,” *American Sociological Review* 64, no. 6 (1999): 861–898; J. Glassman, “Slower than a Massacre”; J. Brennan, “Realizing Civilization through Patrilineal Descent: The Intellectual Making of an African Racial Nationalism in Tanzania, 1920–501,” *Social Identities* 12, no. 4 (2006): 405–423.

¹⁰ Scholars like Deborah Brautigam and Tang Xiaoyang have also gone far to elaborate the complexity of Chinese actors in Africa. See D. Brautigam, *The Dragon’s Gift: The Real Story of China in Africa* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹¹ J. Zoetelief, “Dragons in the Savannah: A Case Study of New Chinese Migrants in Tamale, Ghana,” MA thesis, Leiden University (2009): 46–47.

¹² Personal communication, Marina de Regt, 2012.

Western identities in the literature on Africa-China relations or in popular discourses, including the internet exchanges documented by Cheng.¹³ It is therefore surprising that scholars have not yet more fully analyzed the way race has been constructed in mutually constitutive ways, as ideas of “Black,” “Asian,” and “White” identities intersect. Even more interesting is the way that whiteness seems to disappear as a category analytically, despite its omnipresence in much of the source material.

One reason this may be so is that whiteness itself is so frequently a normalized or unmarked category—even within African and Chinese domestic discourses on race and nationalism. This is true not only for the research subjects who may be interviewed or surveyed; scholars, journalists, and other public commentators may also do the same. Chinese activities or behaviors in Africa may be criticized in ways that contain an implicit, unstated reference to the “West.” For example, in the early 2000s the first news editorials began to appear that characterized China as a “rogue donor” in Africa. The implication was that there were other donors (i.e., Western ones) who were not rogues but who followed the rule of law, and that these “other donors” did not need to be named.¹⁴

In more recent years it has become more common to make these comparisons very explicit—narratives of the differences between “Western” and “Chinese” actors

carrying out development or investment in Africa create one of the most common triangles of this discourse. Triangulation may take on different characteristics depending upon the source. In China, for example, according to Pal Nyiri, current Chinese narratives describe Chinese “trade, investment, labor export, migration and development aid with distinctly civilizational overtones,” and may position “new” Chinese engagement as superior to that of a declining West.¹⁵ Discourses from outside of China—not only in Europe and the United States but also in African countries—can on the other hand be patronizing or protectionist, positioning Western governments or nongovernmental agencies as advocates of African interests in the face of destructive Chinese practices.

V. Race Triangulation in Colonial Mine Labor

I will start with an example from Africa’s colonial period: the recruitment of Chinese labor to the gold mines of South Africa and to the Gold Coast at the turn of the twentieth century. In the case of the Transvaal, opposition to the employment of Chinese mine workers in the gold mines came in large part from white labor unions, who were concerned that Chinese laborers would compete with them for jobs and undermine their salaries and other working conditions.¹⁶ These unions in turn were linked to labor movements abroad in the United States, illustrating the global context of race and labor. As Tu Huynh has shown,

¹³ Y. Cheng, “From Campus Racism to Cyber Racism: Discourse of Race and Chinese Nationalism.”

¹⁴ M. Naím, “Help Not Wanted,” *New York Times*, February 15, 2007.

¹⁵ P. Nyiri, “The Yellow Man’s Burden: Chinese Migrants on a Civilizing Mission,” *The China Journal* 56 (2006): 83–106.

¹⁶ Y. J. Park, *A Matter of Honour: Being Chinese in South Africa* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

debates about the Chinese workers strengthened racial perceptions and hierarchies, contributing to new understandings of what it meant to be “white” and “civilized.”¹⁷ Rachel Bright’s new work has demonstrated the significance of colonial and imperial discourses of whiteness in this Transvaal scheme, and their connection to the eventual imposition of race-based legislation in South Africa as well as limits on Asian migration that lasted until the 1990s.¹⁸

In the Gold Coast, writes Kwabena Akurang-Parry, opposition to the use of Chinese mine labor was voiced primarily in the African press. The West African “intelligentsia” opposed Chinese labor not on the grounds that it would displace African workers (there was a shortage of mine labor), but rather because of the highly racialized discourse that accompanied colonial labor recruitment. Akurang-Parry demonstrates that not only was there a triangulation of African and Chinese identity in the context of white domination but that African resistance also explicitly addressed this problem. Thus, African educated elites were negotiating and contesting the co-construction of “Asianness” and “Africanness” in the “racial field” of colonial Gold Coast labor relations.¹⁹

¹⁷ T. Huynh, “Loathing and Love: Postcard Representations of Indentured Chinese Laborers in South Africa’s Reconstruction, 1904–1910,” *Safundi* 9, no. 4 (2008): 395–425.

¹⁸ R. Bright, *Chinese Labour in South Africa, 1902–10: Race, Violence, and Global Spectacle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

¹⁹ K. Akurang-Parry, “We Cast about for a Remedy: Chinese Labor and African Opposition in the Gold Coast, 1874–1914,” *The International Journal of*

According to Akurang-Parry’s sources, “the African laborers’ resistance to colonial wage employment had nothing to do with job competition. Rather, the African intelligentsia’s opposition had everything to do with debunking assertions that African laborers were lazy, consequently drawing attention to poor working conditions in the Gold Coast.”²⁰ What were the assertions of colonialists that so raised the ire of these critics?

In 1897, Gold Coast Governor William E. Maxwell stated that the use of Chinese labor would lead to “the development of alluvial gold-fields by a class of miners, who are more industrious and better instructed than the Gold Coast negro.”²¹ Governor Maxwell asserted that Chinese labor on a large scale was not only needed for extraction of mineral wealth, but also engaged in a broader discourse about the civilizing influence of the Chinese. Not only would Chinese labor develop the gold fields but they would also solve the problem of the lack of “skilled artisans” in the Gold Coast: “bricks could easily be made and timber could easily be sawn, could we depend upon a more enterprising race than the negro.” Maxwell imagined that a resident Chinese population would make gardens, keep cattle, and introduce petty trades and industries, all of which would help to “supply the table” of the British residents and make their “condition of life

African Historical Studies 34, no. 2 (2001); I acknowledge that Akurang-Parry’s argument recognizes the role of class and other divisions within the African community in relationship to these commentaries; I do not have room to develop this aspect here but plan to do so in the future.

²⁰ Akurang-Parry, 365–384.

²¹ Akurang-Parry, 368.

generally improved.”²² The actual number of Chinese workers that eventually made their way to the Gold Coast was quite small (around thirty) and they did not stay for long. Yet he viewed this as a “pilot project,” he told the Liverpool Chamber of Commerce, in which the presence of “an industrious and energetic Asiatic population” would force Africans “to learn and to work harder” by example and competition. Governor Maxwell’s reference to “Asiatics” in this instance referred not only to Chinese but also to “Indian Coolies” and “East Africans.”

What is interesting about this case is the way in which the discourse of race that accompanied Maxwell’s labor proposals (rather than a significant number of actual Chinese workers) constituted the field of contestation of race. The newspaper commentators that wrote about the Chinese workers were not commenting on the Chinese themselves (i.e., it was not an African-Chinese racial discourse) but rather were commenting on the way dominant white colonial rhetoric used qualities of “Chineseness” to denigrate Africans and to deflect attention from real issues facing African mine workers. Triangulation took a similar form in colonial discourses about Africans and Chinese on sugar plantations in the Caribbean and the American South, where Asian laborers worked alongside African laborers.²³

²² Akurang-Parry, 371–372.

²³ See for example: M. Jung, *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), and L. Yun, *The Coolie Speaks: Chinese Indentured Laborers and African Slaves in Cuba* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2008).

VI. *Foreigners and Citizenship*

Kim’s introduction of the issue of “civic ostracism” has significance for understanding the triangulation of race in China-Africa relations as well. In nineteenth century America, Asian Americans were valorized over Black Americans—“one Chinaman is worth two negroes”—yet the Chinese population was viewed as alien, foreign, non-assimilable, and sojourning. The form of citizenship that was recognized for African Americans on the other hand was joined by devalorization in a racial hierarchy in relationship to Asian Americans. This interplay between hierarchical valorization and forms of civic inclusion or exclusion seems especially interesting to consider in relationship to the China-Africa question. Of course, many of the same racial rhetorics that accompanied nineteenth-century American labor questions were present in the kinds of discourses that were part of colonization in Africa. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, these become complicated in different ways as the “racial field” shifted globally.

The close-up study of Chinese in South Africa by Yoon Jung Park provides us with some excellent examples of the ways this kind of process took place historically. What Park’s work also demonstrates is the agency of Chinese citizens in South Africa who lobbied on the one hand for race privilege held by “whites” (one of many forms of valorization) while at the same time holding onto their Chinese ethnic, national, or “foreign” status. They sought concessions that would grant them race privilege while rejecting a form of civic inclusion that would strip them of their Chinese identity. Thus,

Chinese residents in South Africa negotiated a field of racial positions that were changing dramatically in the late twentieth century. Within this field they sought to maintain two forms of belonging—a sense of valorization within the communities of belonging that both held privilege (i.e., “whiteness”) and another form of identity that provided membership in a broader group of overseas Chinese that shared a specific connection to a mythical Chinese “homeland” and cultural lineage.

This work shows the intersection of, and the challenge for, diverse groups of Chinese in South Africa who negotiated the contradictions of their status in a state that legally regulated racial identity and association. The entanglements of race, ethnicity, and citizenship—as well as their deep foundations in ideas of superior “heritage, civilization and living standards”—are made clear in Park’s example in language that echoes Stoler’s argument. Park’s work shows us that a focus on the ways that “white” identity was negotiated in a multiracial and transforming field of social relations in South Africa can reveal much not only about the Chinese South Africans. It also demonstrates that this field of relationships is not binary but holds many positions, and that actors negotiate and contest these positions in relationship to one another and in relationship to state and institutional actors.

The question of citizenship in the field of racialization is also relevant to the analysis of the conflicts that took place in China among African and Chinese students in the 1980s. At that time, while there were many complex reasons for the tensions that

erupted into violence in Nanjing, one of the issues had to do with the understanding of foreignness—all foreign students were called “*waiguoren*” or “*liuxuesheng*.” As Barry Sautman found in his interviews with Chinese and foreign students, white foreigners were viewed as “contributors to China’s development, while Africans were viewed as uncultured supplicants.”²⁴ There was therefore a co-construction in this racial field of African and white “foreigners,” in which both the hierarchy of race valorization and the identity of the civically excluded intersected. In 1980s China, foreign students were given privileges that were not extended to their Chinese student classmates. There was therefore a difference in privilege according to civic status, as foreigners had a higher standard of living, partly related to China’s complex and long history of attributing high status to foreignness. At the same time, however, the Chinese students perceived the foreign students differently along racial lines. Thus, some of their resentment had to do with what they perceived as the contradictions of race position and foreign status.

New fieldwork by Lan Shanshan in Guangzhou shows that the category of “foreigner” in China, as well as its racialization, is unstable and has changed over time. Less privileged migrant workers from rural areas of China who meet Africans in Guangzhou may not distinguish between white and black identities, using the terms *waiguoren* (foreigner) and *heiren*

²⁴ B. Sautman, “Anti-Black Racism in Post-Mao China,” 413–437.

(blacks) interchangeably.²⁵ Africans who make money through trade and speak English fluently may be valorized highly in Guangzhou, even higher than Chinese, where English is a language of power and exchange. On the other hand, white foreigners whose public behavior is considered to be “uncivilized” according to ideals in China of civility and moral standards (*suzhi*), may be viewed as low quality. In the Chinese legal context, distinctions between different categories of foreignness have also become more complex recently as immigration policies have developed and enforced new policies.²⁶

VII. *Is Whiteness Western?*

In both popular and scholarly discussions, when whiteness is discussed it is most often conflated with “Western” identity. This “Western” identity is then compared with the identities of “Chinese,” either as state-level actors or at the individual level. Yet the construction of “whiteness” as “Western,” just like that of other racial categories, obscures the ways that whiteness itself is a complicated, flexible, and negotiated category and contested in different times and places.

One of the important ways that “whiteness” has been disaggregated has been in reference to qualities of civilization and backwardness that are associated with geography, differentiated as “West” and “East.” As Pal Nyiri’s work has shown, popular media in China has cast Russia as

having a lower level or “benchmark” of modernization than countries in Western Europe. Qualities of backwardness that are found amongst other underdeveloped groups are attributed not only to Russians but also to other Eastern Europeans. As Nyiri argues, “as one proceeds east and south, not only do judgments about ‘backwardness’ become increasingly harsh but the ‘quality’ of Chinese migrants is also cast in a more favorable light compared to that of locals.”²⁷

This past spring, I interviewed a Chinese shopkeeper in Sardinia and talked with her about my research on Chinese in Africa. She talked at length about the poverty and hardship in Africa, using the word *ku* (苦) to mean “bitterness.” As we continued to talk, she used the same language to describe the Sardinians living in the rural farming areas of the center of the island. Both landscapes, she explained, were not good ones for a shopkeeper who wanted to get ahead, because the people were too impoverished and underdeveloped to provide an adequate market for her goods. She has plans to return to Shanghai, where she believes that despite the competition she may have better luck in trading. The rural Sardinians were compared with Africans using virtually the same kind of language, and Italy was also described as de-developing as part of the Euro crisis. China on the other hand, in her view, was still on the rise and a place of opportunity.

As I walked out of this woman’s shop in Santa Teresa di Gallura, an African man passed directly in front of me in the narrow

²⁵ S. Lan, “The Shifting Meanings of Race: African Diaspora Communities in China,” unpublished paper : 22.

²⁶ S. Lan, “The Shifting Meanings of Race”: 23–4.

²⁷ P. Nyiri, “The Yellow Man’s Burden: Chinese Migrants on a Civilizing Mission,” 102.

street. He was a street vendor, carrying a cardboard stand on which inexpensive consumer items like sunglasses and socks were hanging. These were also Chinese-made goods, being sold in front of the Chinese shop by an African vendor. This experience caused me to think again about the relationship between Africans, Chinese, and Europeans and the need for more research in Europe and other global settings where Africans and Chinese may encounter one another as members of migrant communities. As Nyiri shows, these relationships are also racialized, in this case not only in terms of race hierarchy or civic inclusion/exclusion, but also as reflections of larger understandings of civilization and primordial qualities of race, ethnicity, and nation.

VIII. Conclusion

If race history is in essence a “history of meanings” that are historically produced in contexts of political and social relations, then why might it be that my audiences in 2014 are so concerned with this topic? What might account for the flood of media accounts that create a binary opposition between categories of “African” and “Chinese,” while making whiteness invisible? And when whiteness is recognized, and conflated with the “West,” why does it take on such patronizing overtones?

An obvious answer has been suggested at the level of states and large-scale institutions: structurally, European and American actors have felt that their long-term colonial and postcolonial interests are threatened by the rapid rise of Chinese engagement in Africa since 2006. This was

argued early on by Daniel Large, who observed that the 2006 FOCAC meeting in Beijing created a wave of anxiety in the “West,” and traced both the pace of Chinese investment and Western media and scholarly proliferation back to this FOCAC moment.²⁸

The African American historian W. E. B. Du Bois may have had another perspective on this discursive anxiety. Describing another moment in history, Du Bois wrote that at the turn of the last century, due to the increased mobility of nonwhite people in the world, including the circulation of ideas through contacts and exchanges, white men of political and economic standing were becoming anxious. The threats posed by the crossings, contacts and emerging global nonwhite race consciousness resulted in a hostile white reaction and efforts to preserve the “racial unity of nations.”²⁹ Du Bois’ early writings about topics that would later be framed as “Pan-Africanism” and “whiteness studies” discussed a world at the turn of the last century in which South-South engagements posed a threat politically and culturally to white colonial and imperial domination. Like the time when Du Bois was writing, in today’s world there are also new circulations of people, ideas,

²⁸ D. Large, “Beyond ‘Dragon in the Bush’: The Study of China-Africa Relations,” *African Affairs* 107 (2008): 45–61.

²⁹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903); described in M. Marable, *Living Black History: How Reimagining the African-American Past Can Remake America's Racial Future* (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 96, and in M. Lake and H. Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

and wealth, and there are also new anxieties about the shifting configuration of global power. What Du Bois asked us to consider in 1903 still seems relevant today—that these dynamics are highly racialized. The emergence of a new form of global color consciousness in 1903 was the spark for the emergence of a new “virulent politics of whiteness.” Whether such a politics has returned today—or has never gone away—is a topic for debate that cannot be taken up here, of course. What I have tried to show in this paper, however, is that the process through which these shifting engagements have been historically racialized—in a binary framework that may obscure the position of whiteness itself—has not yet been well understood by scholars of Africa-China relations. By understanding the full complexity of race positions and their co-construction in the field of Africa-China engagement in the twenty-first century, we can gain a much deeper understanding of the new “global color lines” and the ways they continue to be renegotiated.