



Sinophobia Spreads Faster Than the Coronavirus

By April Zhu



There is a children’s game where a message is whispered from one person to the next, down along a single-file line. By the time it reaches the last person, the message is inevitably mangled and barely resembles its original. This game is a schoolyard miniature of the real-life dynamics of rumours; it illustrates what happens when we pass on what we think we hear. In the U.S., we call this game “Telephone”. In Kenya, it is called “Chinese whispers.”

The video starts with a long frame: the door of a construction site office in Kakamega. Pasted on the top and sides of the door are red *huīchūn*, Chinese New Year banners with auspicious benedictions. In the background, a man says everything you need to know about the rest of the video: “Watu wanasema hawa watu wako na ugonjwa”. They’re saying these people have a disease.

A pick-up truck rolls in, and a young Chinese man hops out, backpack slung over his shoulder. Two Chinese men emerge from another door, each with a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. These men are filmed long range, as in wildlife photography. The telephoto lens is long enough to capture their facial expressions—wry laughter while killing time and waiting, gathering for something—but too far to capture anything they’re saying. Silent, inscrutable smiles.

In the same week that a suspected carrier of COVID-19—previously known as the Wuhan

coronavirus after the source of the outbreak—flew into Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, there were at least two other instances of “coronavirus scares” at Chinese construction camps in Kenya that did not make the headlines. In Kakamega, a rumour about a Chinese man wearing a face mask with blood dripping from his nose prompted someone to alert the Ministry of Health. Medical professionals were dispatched, accompanied by police. The screening process was documented by local news agencies, including the rogue YouTube channel Magical Kenya News, which posted a video entitled “CORONA VIRUS SCARE IN KAKAMEGA”. (Magical Kenya has since taken it down, a representative said, because YouTube does not monetise COVID-19-related content.)

The rest of the video is the familiar molasses drawl of medical bureaucracy: some Chinese men being screened and paperwork filed, but mostly little else happening. In an interview later given by the OCPD (Officer Commanding Police Division) overseeing the screening, health workers screened seven Chinese people, together with Kenyans who had been in close contact with them, but found no flu-like symptoms, nor any history of recent travel to China.

“That’s Li... Chong...” the OCPD says, drawing the vowels into the back of his throat, referring to the young man with the backpack. “He came from China on 17 July”. “And since that time last year, no colleagues of ours have come from China”, said “Li Chong”, shaking his head, compliant but vexed. The OCPD, wearing a mask with only the top straps tied, says, “It’s good also to take precautions. Just like you did when you went to the... with the... with this”—gesturing to the dust mask the Chinese man had worn, which instigated this coronavirus scare—“you were taking precautions”.

But that is precisely the perversity of coronavirus, isn’t it? That, in this instance, no one did anything wrong. Better safe than sorry. It was just a Chinese man wearing a dust mask, but what if it wasn’t? An epidemic raises stakes so that biological risks force us to take actions that we feel are racist but which, we swear, aren’t.

COVID-19 is a diasporic disease—in the sense that it has lit up in its path the global tracks of the Chinese diaspora—but also because of the identities it has activated abroad. The fears the epidemic has stoked have far outpaced its spread, and discussion of the disease’s politics, for better or worse, often outweighs that of epidemiology. Its ripple effects are familiar to anyone in a diaspora: negotiating how much distance to put between yourself and your origin—“origin” being that which others perceive it to be, and what ills they perceive it to embody.

Isn’t it ironic that face masks make us look even more the same than they say we already do?

Five years ago, there were only a handful of Chinese restaurants in Nairobi, some Chinese-run casinos and markets, and a dejected “China Centre” that was meant to be doing something diplomatic. Five years ago, there was no Standard Gauge Railway stretching from Mombasa to Nairobi, built by World Bank-blacklisted Chinese contractors with loans extended by the Chinese Import-Export Bank and tainted with political graft. There was no Xinhua headquarters. No Chinese children at art summer camps. This is no longer the case.

The narrative of the Chinese takeover is a simple story, and simple stories are the strongest, like deep, ready grooves along which individual stories and images slide, all going in the same direction. The Chinese man caning a Kenyan employee melds into frozen Chinese tilapia thawed and sold in Gikomba as Lolwe’s fresh catch melds into “Made in China” vitenge melds into the Chinese man caught on video calling Uhuru a monkey melds into the swarms of passengers unloaded into Kenya twice a week from China Southern Airlines planes that refuse to stop flying.

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The invasion narrative derives much of its power exactly from how powerless most Kenyans feel to stop it. What political agency do everyday Kenyan citizens truly have over the looming spectre of “China” in all its forms, political, economic, and demographic? Not very much. The centralised, national nature of Kenya-China negotiation—not to mention the current absence of a cohesive political opposition in Kenya, plus basal corruption within the entire political system—means that, on the whole, there are few avenues for an individual Kenyan citizen to exercise power, to resist.

Is this natural paranoia towards a national invader much different from that towards a pathological invader? After all, disgust is our bodies’ evolved reaction to the trespassing of boundaries, argues geographer Theo Aalders, PhD candidate in Environmental Social Science at the University of Gothenburg. Whether the boundaries are those of our own physical bodies or those of a nation, things that are out of their place, things that can move into our own space, can trigger the primary, deep emotion of disgust.

We fear COVID-19, this mysterious, invisible, deadly pathogen that enters bodies without permission, precisely because—short of very extreme measures—we are almost powerless to stop its entry. COVID-19 and China: both foreign contagions, carried by air, indifferent to borders and boundaries, indifferent to the bodies they enter and “colonise,” yet capable of wreaking havoc on core functions.

However, if disgust results from the trespassing of boundaries, then this emotional reflex to invasion is not inherently bad. “On one hand, this reflex is at the root of every anti-colonial movement of every revolution against foreign invaders, so it’s something very progressive, something extremely liberating”, says Aalders. Take the proposed Lamu Coal Plant, for example: its promoters steamrolled past the voices of the local communities its construction would threaten and whose livelihoods it would destroy, a coal plant whose construction would ravage the rich archive of Swahili culture that is Lamu Town. The activists and communities that organised to defeat the coal plant—and ultimately did—drew from a form of repulsion at neoliberal development, at conquest, at invasion of their “boundaries.” But they were able to do this without sliding down the grooves of a simple “Chinese invasion” narrative. The remedy to sinophobia is not sinophilia; it is nuance.

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But once the scale shifts from a national level to an individual level, according to Aalders, then suddenly this potentially very liberating emotion or reflex turns into its own opposite. That “disgust” is now projected towards an individual, perhaps a Chinese man wearing a mask.

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It was the second Sunday in a row that we all had to wear masks to church in Nairobi. I have been attending a Chinese immigrant church in the small rented room of an office building—vacant on Sunday mornings but for us—with grey plastic picnic chairs, a blue carpet over-ripening to brown, a projector for lyrics and sermon PowerPoints, but very little else. At the door, the usher politely requested us to take one light blue surgical mask from a plastic box, plus a pump of hand sanitiser. As we sang, the masks would cling to our faces as we breathed in, and puff out as we breathed out: words pulsing in and out on blue masks like heartbeats on our faces.

The first week that we wore masks in church, the pastor told us that the masks did not symbolise a lack of faith. The church headquarters in Taiwan had suggested that its congregations begin taking extra precautions because they were diaspora churches after all, comprised of people travelling from greater China, especially right after Chinese New Year. COVID-19 had wrought chaos and tragedy on what ought to have been a celebration comprised of millions of family gatherings, many hard-earned after a year of migrant work far from home. But now, because of limited flights from China and general uncertainty, people were travelling in disorganised spurts from China back to countries like Kenya where they usually worked. Now, Pastor said, we must make use of the means God has provided to protect ourselves.

But the second time we wore masks in church, the pastor told us we needed to take a vote. Direct flights from China to Kenya were still running, and although the Chinese Embassy in Kenya had suggested travellers from China self-quarantine for 14 days upon landing in Kenya, many were still going about their normal lives, frequenting grocery stores, offices, restaurants. Perhaps we should consider worship from home for the next two Sundays, Pastor said. He gave us a couple of minutes to pray about it.

“Ok now, who is in favour of suspending meeting at church temporarily for the next two weeks?” Eyes darted around. Four hands. “Don’t look at others!” A couple more hands. “And who is in favour of continuing to meet here?” It was a tie.

COVID-19 and China: both foreign contagions, carried by air, indifferent to borders and boundaries, indifferent to the bodies they enter and “colonise”

The pastor asked one woman how her husband, who had just left to use the bathroom, would vote, and she said she didn’t know. But just then he walked in and, chuckling as he realised he was to break the deadlock, said, “*Zài jiā bei*”. Let’s just stay home.

After the worship service was over, one man who had voted to keep coming to church—a northerner whose voice resonated within his stout, square body and throughout the room—was yelling. Not at anyone in particular, just about the situation, about the strictures that were hemming in his life. “Masks, masks, wear here, wear there!”. He wanted to will normalcy into being. A Taiwanese brother tried to soothe him, saying that he too had never worn masks until now, and see how he even had to take his off while singing because it was bothering him, but at the end of the day we still needed to be careful.

The northerner sighed. “They’re saying we have to wear them everywhere, even in front of black people”. Even in its absence—or perhaps because of the potential of landfall, that fear of coronavirus which outpaces coronavirus itself—the disease was demanding that we change our movement and gathering. Those light blue masks that we hated, in the eyes of those around us, were ironically omens of the very disease from which we were trying to protect ourselves. We manage our lives against gazes.

I imagined what someone in the hallway would see, looking through the window into our little, dim, grey church with a telephoto lens, our mouths moving silently, our faces ever inscrutable.

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Diaspora has its own set of physics. It distorts us through the gaze of those around us, just as I, growing up in America, have always been more Chinese than I have ever wanted to be, only to find when I go to China that I had been seeing myself through a diaspora funhouse mirror and will never

be Chinese enough.

The relationship between “homeland” and present-land determines how big or small you appear in the mirror, and this changes completely depending on where you happen to be. In Kenya, as if with a tilt of the head, my image changes in an instant. No longer an ethnic minority in a white country, I am, rather, an unwilling participant in a story of exploitation. My face represents a force against which Kenyans feel they have no power.

Surely sinophobia does not map in the same way in every country. Surely the Chinese diaspora in Kenya, complicit, whether we want to be or not, in some form of exploitation, does not experience sinophobia in the same way that the Chinese living in Italy do. The phobias that orient those of us in places far from home—sinophobia, xenophobia, Islamophobia—are barely sufficient to describe these shapeshifting spectra of power and shades of unbelonging.

Sometimes when we feel too much a stranger, we look for something familiar where we are. What a precious little paradox, to seek small replicas of home that comfort us even as they remind us how far away we really are. It was only when I began reporting on the coronavirus epidemic that I began regularly attending the Chinese church in Nairobi.

I had been to this particular office-building-church before. Its congregation included white- and blue-collar Christians from mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. Chinese immigrant churches are in many ways all cut from the same cloth, and for me, this little church—in its particular smallness and messiness and diversity, and its big post-service Chinese lunch—was very similar to the churches that I had grown up in, Chinese churches that—with no significant time spent in China—were my only point of reference to the homeland.

I had spent at least a couple of weeks reporting on COVID-19, especially around the first suspected case in Kenya, writing about everything from how test kits work to the situation of [Kenyan students trapped in Wuhan](#). Tweeting about coronavirus filled my mentions with snakes, bats, and go-homes, which was neither surprising nor unbearable. Coronavirus has become a racialised problem everywhere in the world, and Kenya is no exception. But the entire process left me feeling alienated in ways I did not want to admit to myself. Something, in the end, turned me towards “home,” which, in the absence of actual home, meant church.

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That first Sunday when we had to wear masks, in the bridge of one of the songs, the slide said “individual worship”, and everyone prayed aloud by themselves. The man behind me, a Beijinger who always wore the same black jacket and pants to church, prayed loudly. Loud, but not just so others could hear. This I knew because his sentences were elliptical; they didn’t make sense strung together. He begged God to draw near. He prayed for Wuhan, for China. For Kenya. Protect us, Lord. Every so often, he would pause, inhale, and, on the exhale, breathe out: “*Zhǔ ah*”, O Lord. Draw near.

Perhaps it was the dry cracks in his voice, or how loud he prayed to Someone who already knew his heart. Maybe it was because it sounded like a solo cutting through a chorus of other solos, or the fact that all our words were a little muffled by our masks. I started to cry.

I realised then that, though I was for a long time steeped in everything coronavirus—numbers, policy, statements, projections—as well as the thick, thorny political discourse about it online, this

was the first time I had been exposed to people who were merely, truly grieving. People who, between breaths of begging God, entreating with small sentences simplified by pain, were hurting on behalf of those who had been rent apart by this disaster. People who were themselves rent apart.

In the polemic and racism weighing down this diasporic disease, I thought, the missing timbre has been grief. For as much as sinophobia maps differently around the world, there is one thing it requires all of us in the Chinese diaspora to do: consider how we are seen. And, in a time of coronavirus, this means that others' gaze has shrunken the space within which people can grieve.

This, perhaps, is the cost of speaking in "Chinese whispers."

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