



Racism Towards Africans Is Alive and Well in China

By Winslow Roberston



The recent wave of evictions and forced detentions of Africans living in China, especially in the southern city of Guangzhou, has shocked most people, especially Africans. While the reporting and analysis of the ongoing situation have been quite widespread, and have even forced a response from the Chinese government, most observers have generally not connected this episode to previous, and even uglier, episodes of anti-black African action in China. In fact, there is a long history of these kinds of violence and discrimination against Africans in China, which are linked to how Africans are viewed there. During the 2014 Ebola outbreak in three West African countries, Africans in China were subjected to forced quarantine episodes too, but they did not capture the popular imagination the way similar episodes of mistreatment do now.

Chinese perceptions of Africans draw from two separate threads: that Africans are dangerous, disease-carrying individuals, and also a tolerated minority subject to the whims of state violence.

It is worth revisiting this long history.

Scholarly tensions

African students have been coming to China since 1960, and violent tensions between those students and the Chinese have been occurring since 1962, when a Zanzibari was beaten by hotel attendants.

Still, it would not be until 1979 in the Shanghai Textile Engineering Institute when a pattern of anti-African violence was established by Chinese students, which “culminated in the [Nanjing] 1988-89 racial turmoil.” The Shanghai violence began on July 3, when Chinese students complained about the African students’ loud music and confronted them. A brawl ensued, and eventually a mob of Chinese students attacked the African students with makeshift weapons, following rumors Africans had raped Chinese women. The police response was insufficient to protect the Africans. According to scholar Barry Sautman, “Sixteen foreign students were hospitalized, but as many as 50 foreigners and 24 Chinese may have been injured.” A similar clash took place in Tianjin in 1986, this time over the mostly male African students’ relations with Chinese women. They were also reproached for playing loud music. The African students, after being detained by the police, needed protection from Chinese student groups raiding the foreign students’ dormitories. It should be noted that African diplomats had no success in trying to work with the Chinese authorities to better protect their citizens in China; some ambassadors suggested their governments send fewer students to China.

Nanjing universities in particular seemed to have problems dealing with African students, and their branch of the African Students Union sent a letter to the authorities protesting their treatment a year before the 1979 Shanghai violence, with no apparent change in policy. In 1980, according to Michael J. Sullivan and Philip Snow, Chinese students put up posters denouncing their government for welcoming African visitors.

The incident

There were multiple racially motivated attacks against African students between 1985 and 1986, and the Chinese police would arrive but not protect the students. In 1988, officials in Hehai University built a wall around the foreign students hall, ostensibly to protect against theft, but actually to ensure that African students did not bring Chinese women to their rooms. When the African students knocked down the wall, the university officials informed them that funds from their stipend would be docked in order to pay for the damages, and the students staged demonstrations. It was during this tumult that the university decided on December 24, the day of the Christmas Eve dance, that all foreign students must register their guests at the university gate. Two African students, from Benin and Liberia, wanted to bring two Chinese girls with them to the dance, and went to the main gate at Hehai. After that, what actually happened is bitterly disputed, as illustrated by two passages in Michael Sullivan’s article:

[T]he entrance guard asked the two girls to register, the two African students and refused to let them do so. At that point, several other African students came over and started a quarrel with the entrance guard. In the ensuing brawl, eleven staff members were injured, one of them seriously, including a university vice-president who had one of his ribs broken when he tried to persuade the combatants to stop fighting.

The African students ... claim that the security guard permitted them and their guests to enter the campus after he saw the women’s Hong Kong passports. When the Benin student later returned to the front gate to wait for another Chinese friend, a group of heckling Chinese students attacked him, chanting “Black Devil, you must respect the laws of China!” and “What do you want, Black Devil?” The African students then ran to the foreign students’ hall to inform their friends of this attack after which several African students “began to arm themselves with wooden sticks, empty Jinling beer bottles and stones.”

Official accounts stress that the African students were difficult to manage. African student accounts stress the racist provocation of the Chinese students. Regardless of whose “fault” it was (I personally believe the African students’ interpretation of events), there was a fundamental hardening of Chinese student attitudes after the incident. Within hours, a rumor of a Chinese woman being

kidnapped by the African students mobilized 300 Chinese students to lay siege against the African students' dormitories, and both group of students fought until 4 a.m. on December 25.

Black devils

On December 25, Christmas Day, another group of 300 Chinese students attacked the foreign students' hall because they believed a rumor that a Chinese man had been killed by an African student the night before, but the authorities had failed to arrest him. Shouting that they wanted to "kill the black devils," they began another melee with the African students, which lasted for over two hours until it was broken up by the police. The General Union of African Students in China (GUASC) requested from the university a police escort to the train station so they could go to Beijing to contact their respective embassies, which was swiftly refused. The African students, after suffering multiple attacks from mobs and being offered minimal protection by the university administrators, decided to go to the rail station on foot. To the Chinese students, it looked like they were fleeing after one of their own had murdered a Chinese man and that the government was letting them go free.

In the evening, 600 students from Hehai University went off to gather support for their cause. They marched to Nanjing University, but as Sullivan recounts, "only a handful of students... responded. The vast majority had been bribed with five RMB and a special meal by the school authorities not to participate." Though Nanjing University did not offer much in the way of student support, other universities had students march in unison with the Hehai contingent, where they eventually made their way to the Jinling Hotel, the largest hotel in Nanjing and where the protesters believed the local officials were hiding the African students. Those African students, in the meantime, made their way to the Nanjing rail station but had no tickets to board any trains, and the security bureau would not allow them to leave because they needed to get to the bottom of what happened during the Christmas Eve fight. The bureau stationed forces to both prevent the African students from leaving and the Chinese students from attacking the African students.

On December 26, as the Chinese students were returning to their universities, a group of 200 went to Nanjing University again to try and muster more support for their cause. A group of white foreigners engaged with the protesters, and when asked why they wanted to kill the African students, a Chinese protester explained that they wanted justice for the Africans' supposed killing of one of his classmates, and that he had no quarrel with white foreigners. Undercover policemen grabbed that student and a few others and hauled them away. Student demonstrators went to the Nanjing Provincial Government Building complex and demanded that the legal system be changed so as not to privilege foreigners, and that the murderers be arrested. The Chinese police dispersed the crowd after an hour. More dark-skinned foreigners went to the Nanjing rail station as they came under attack by racist Chinese mobs, and several non-dark-skinned foreign students from the US, Japan and Europe also joined in solidarity. This group of 140 foreign students was eventually discovered by the Chinese student demonstrators, and they gathered 3,000 supporters to insure that "justice" was meted to the murderers. In the end, the situation was resolved when armed guards forced the African students onto buses and transported them to a military guest house in Yizheng, roughly an hour outside of Nanjing. This protected the African students, removed their presence from the student demonstrators, and allowed the police to hold the instigators of the Christmas Eve incident, whoever it might be.

Beginning on December 27, the police took steps to quash any further demonstrations in Nanjing, and, perhaps most importantly, had a spokesperson at the Jiangsu Ministry of Education inform the public that nobody had died during the Christmas Eve incident. While there were limited pockets of further demonstrations, they had all ended by December 30 in Nanjing. PRC authorities also moved quickly to make sure stories about the incident did not leak to the US or European press, as non-

African students came under increased surveillance and the African students were indirectly told that they would face expulsion if they communicated their experiences to foreign reporters.

Also, on December 27, Sullivan writes:

A diplomatic delegation representing the African nations of Zambia, Ghana, Congo, Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Senegal, Equatorial Guinea and Niger were allowed to travel to Yizheng to meet the African students. The diplomats were not successful in winning the release of their students, reflecting the African nations' lack of influence with the Chinese government.

In contrast, the American students that were brought to Yizheng were immediately returned to Nanjing after the US consulate threatened Chinese authorities. While in Yizheng, on December 31 the police forcefully held six African students they believed to be responsible for the Christmas Eve incident, and the Hehai students were taken to a military base while the others were sent back to Nanjing. The remaining Hehai students returned to their university on January 5, though not after new regulations were created to ensure that they could not have Chinese girlfriends sleep with them in the university. Of the six detained students, three were released, and three were expelled.

Historical memory

This marks the end of the incident proper, though there were still flare ups in other cities, including mob attacks on African students in Wuhan—the same Wuhan where African students faced difficult choices some 30 years later. Kaiser Kuo had been in Beijing during that winter and had heard about the protests, and he graciously took to the time to share his recollections in a personal email correspondence, from Washington DC, on December 20th, 2012:

I was actually in Beijing in the winter of 1988-1989, not in Nanjing, but there were some anti-African protests that spread to Beijing as well, and there was (back in those days, without the Internet or any more reliable means of transmission) all sorts of confusion as to where the actual events took place to spark anti-African demonstrations ...

... We kept hearing stories, filtered of course through a very unsympathetic international student crowd, that they started simply because some African students in Nanjing (other versions said Hangzhou, and sometimes these stories were repeated with Beijing as the setting) had taken some Chinese girls to a dance and weren't allowed in, or had trouble with the security or with male Chinese students at the door. These stories escalated into tales about fistfights, about sexual assaults, even about a woman who was supposed to have been (in the exact words I was told) "fucked to death" by African men whose penises were too large for her, so she bled out. I was very skeptical, and was horrified when there were actual marches in Beijing protesting against African students.

Incidentally, there appeared to be a connection between the Nanjing Anti-African Protests and Tiananmen in 1989, as it fused nationalism, racism, gender and youth movement into a powerful force. This confluence is further explored in the important scholarship on Chinese conceptions of race, though Sautman and Sullivan's articles provide excellent backgrounds on the genesis of the Nanjing protests as they related to Chinese racism, nationalism, and perhaps most importantly, the protection of Chinese women. To wit, as noted in Sautman, a 25-year-old Chinese man quoted by John Pomfret in January 1989 said:

When I look at their black faces, I feel uncomfortable. When I see them with our women, my heart boils.

Then and now

Note that one of the most telling aspects of this incident is that African countries could not pressure the Chinese government to release their students from Yizheng, while the US could. Considering that there were only two students from two countries, Benin and Liberia, who were actually involved in the Christmas Eve gate incident, at minimum the Chinese government could have figured out which countries' citizens were not involved and released them, but that did not happen.

One might argue that African governments exerted similarly weak pressure regarding the crisis in Guangzhou. However, African governments exerted strong public and private pressure on behalf of their citizens in response to the incident, and that did generate statements from various organs of official China. Did this pressure have a material effect of Africans on the ground? That is a more difficult question, and answering it would require an entirely new investigation, but getting official China to make any statement is an achievement. Moreover, African governments indicate that these sort of repeated bouts of discrimination against Africans may no longer be acceptable. As Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission, HE Mr. Kwesi Quartey said earlier this month: "Africa values its relationship with China but not at any price. Further act of brutality meted out to Africans will not be countenanced by the African Union and indeed all Africans."

In conclusion, the Nanjing Anti-African Protests were a defining moment of Sino-African relations because they revealed how people on the ground interacted, rather than what leaders expressed to each other in meetings and in documents. To be clear, Chinese people are not uniquely or irredeemably racist. Americans have their own history of rioting against black students, for example. We must collectively ensure that these narratives are part of the current discourse. To that end, part of maintaining these stories is connecting them to the present when necessary. Africans suffer because of the color of their skin, because of false rumors, because of short-sighted Chinese officials, because of a prickly national government. These underlying issues have not significantly improved in the intervening decades.

Adapted from On This Day: The 1988-1989 Nanjing Anti-African Protests. (Cowries and Rice)

This post is from a new partnership between [Africa Is a Country](#) and [The Elephant](#). We will be publishing a series of posts from [their site](#) once a week.

Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on [Twitter](#).