



A George Floyd Moment and the Reality of Being African in China

By Mark Karanja



I was at a trendy French salon in the heart of Beijing's popular Sanlitun neighbourhood organising a photoshoot for the magazine I work for. The model on the shoot was a young Russian woman, our photographer Chinese and the owner of the salon was from France. As we went about prepping for the shoot, I noticed a little girl cowering behind one of the stylists. She appeared anxious. I was concerned, so I tried to get closer to find out what the matter was only for her to jump back and let out a shriek.

She told one of the Chinese stylists that a scary, ugly black man was looking at her. It took me a moment to realise it was me she was talking about. I am not sure whether the child and the stylist both assumed I didn't understand Chinese, but the stylist proceeded to extol my virtues to the inconsolable child, saying how nice I was, how cool my hair looked, and telling her that she had no reason to be afraid of me. But the child repeated the same thing over and over again. I was black, ugly and scary. That coloured the rest of the day. I picked a corner in the waiting area where I had little chance of bumping into the little girl and stayed away from the styling area where the model was having her hair and makeup done until it was necessary for me to be there.

In Kenya, I had become used to the crippling ethnic profiling that was part of my life because of my last name, and the comments made about my appearance, my skin tone, or my facial features which

were deemed undesirable or not conforming to those of the people from my ethnic group. I had learned to navigate the stereotypes, working to dismantle those that worked against me, while embracing the positive ones as a rudder towards growth. In this clash of numerous cultures, I had an identity. I could find my bearings easily, and remain grounded. But leaving Kenya confronted me with a whole new identity. I was no longer a Kikuyu guy from Nairobi's Eastlands with all the baggage that came with that. I was black.

I have come to learn that being black has nothing to do with my culture, and very little indeed to do with my skin colour. It is a global metric by which my worth as a human being is measured.

China is not the easiest place to be black. It is a country with a long history of colourism amongst its own people and against outsiders, and a tendency to push towards homogenisation. Therefore, being black creates a visceral reaction among many locals which results in xenophobic and racist sentiments. Being proudly African, in whichever way that exuded from me, was quickly met with incomprehension at best and absolute disgust at worst. Why would anyone wish to be black, African and proud of it? I encountered a broad definition for people who looked like me, an extensive catalogue of black, ranging from the mildly acceptable, to the tolerable, to the unacceptable.

I have been told that I am not as dark as "real" Africans. And I have seen relief sweep across people's faces when they realise that I am not from Nigeria. To be dark and Nigerian is to embody a negative stereotype both within and outside the black community. People tend to cling to those of their nationality, forming chat groups on WeChat, China's version of WhatsApp, where they share their stories of racism and offer support to each other. For the chosen few who are welcomed into African American circles, the situation is no better as conversations and sentiments almost exclusively centre around the Black American experience in China and around the world. Many African Americans I have encountered in China, though proud to be affiliated with Africa, are often ignorant of its peoples and its cultures. It comes then as no surprise that when the Black Lives Matter movement started getting traction globally, Africans were expected to show solidarity, yet the conversation about what it means to be black and African in a country like China is not a single story.

As an African who identifies as Kenyan in China, my cultural and national identity are subsumed by a greater racial-cultural one. In North America in particular, being black represents an entire culture of Afro-descendants. Such broad identities leave no room for ethnic, regional and national identities from Africa. I have often been engaged in conversations with African Americans in China who automatically assume our lived experiences are to a large extent similar if not entirely identical. They refuse to engage with the notion that, as someone from a majority "black" country, my experiences of systemic oppression are not within the context of race. The man at the top consolidating power for himself and his cronies isn't white but black. The face of oppression in my experience is my own.

And this subsuming of my cultural and national identity is adopted by the Chinese community, where the parent identity of people who look like me is African American, and so it is my job to align myself with that identity as much as possible if I hope to survive. China acts as a petri dish for how the world is stratified, not only along racial lines but along national identities as well. Towards the tail end of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in China, Chinese landlords in Guangzhou province systematically targeted African tenants, making unfounded claims that it was they who had and were spreading the virus. This was despite ample evidence to the contrary. The fear had been sparked by the growing number of cases imported into China before the borders were closed indefinitely. A negligible number of the imported cases were attributed to foreigners returning to China, and fewer still were attributed to Africans. This however didn't stop the evictions, leading to a public outcry both in China and in the rest of the world.

However, to a large extent, African Americans were not singled out. This is because, according to popular belief in Chinese society, “blacks” from America and Europe are better. They can be trusted more. The hierarchy of races in China is ordered from the top in this way: white English speakers, white Western Europeans, white Eastern Europeans, white South Africans followed by Black Americans, South Americans, black South Africans, East Asians, Middle Easterners, Southeast Asians, Pacific Islanders, blacks from the Caribbean and, at the very bottom, the African, the generic term for sub-Saharan Africans. There is a premium placed on being from countries classified by the Chinese government as Native English speaking countries. These are The UK, the US, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Ireland, and South Africa. It narrows the pool of potential candidates for the highly sort after English teaching jobs in the country. Since there is little else in the way of jobs for foreigners in China, anyone who has passable English jostles for the few opportunities. Often, African nationals from English speaking countries are passed over for these types of jobs, even when the employer is willing to hire illegally. Some Africans resort to claiming American or South African nationality, a fact which angers Americans and South Africans in China, as they claim such individuals soil their national reputations.

A recent revision of the [Chinese Greencard application process](#), which sought to make it easier for highly skilled professionals to gain permanent residence in China, laid bare the fear of the African. Chinese netizens took to Weibo (Chinese Twitter) and other Chinese platforms to express their displeasure at the possibility of an influx of foreigners into their land. The outcry took a decidedly dark turn as Chinese nationals expressed their displeasure at a possibly blacker, more Africanised China in future. Africans are already stereotyped as unhygienic, disease-infested layabouts, and the possibility of their being granted permanent leave to remain in China was more than many could contemplate.

[China's perception of people of colour is largely informed by the media.](#) Stereotypes played out in TV shows and reinforced by sports are held as gospel truths. All African Americans are therefore either gun-toting gangsters, or tall pro basketball players, while Africans, especially Kenyans, are incredible marathon runners motivated by the need to run away from lions since we all come from the Maasai Mara. The African is an alien other in the Chinese consciousness. I have had to resort to showing photos of Kenya, of Nairobi, videos of the hustle and bustle to prove that I come from a city just like any other in the world. That phenomenon is not unique to the Chinese. I was once in an argument with an African American friend of mine about where Kenya was located in Africa. He insisted that Kenya bordered Nigeria and could not be dissuaded. Not until I showed him a map but even then, he fell back on his “American innocence”.

The stereotype of Africa as a disease-ridden, famine and war-ravaged continent is still taken as the gospel truth by many in China. There is an unwillingness to engage with the “masses of African people” who populate Chinese cities and study in Chinese schools. This misconception that all Africans are poor has spawned the belief that all Africans are economic migrants to China, constantly taking advantage of the Chinese government’s generosity in the way of the scholarships extended to seemingly undeserving African students, while Chinese students allegedly continue to go without. But these are the same scholarships extended to other Asian, European and South American countries, with the key link being the bilateral agreements forged between China and countries far and wide. Oftentimes, the students on these scholarships only receive them on the condition that they return to their countries of origin upon graduation, because Chinese-educated Africans are a greater asset to the Chinese government back in Africa. In actual fact, investing in African students is investing in China’s future. But your average Chinese citizen will be oblivious to this fact, instead choosing to vilify African students and the merchants who are a direct source of capital for Chinese businesses.

To exist as African is to exist in a state of apology. The proximity to whiteness that African

Americans and Black South Africans have spared them the inconvenience of negative stereotypes. Africa sends some of its best and most brilliant to represent them in Europe and Asia. The African who does not fit into the negative stereotype becomes an exception to the rule rather than an example of what Africa has to offer. It means that in a society as stratified along racial and national lines as this one, the few opportunities available to foreigners in terms of work and education are measured out in relation to one's proximity to whiteness. The African remains at the bottom, a position from which he is still expected to be gracious and grateful.

This ignorance is exhibited not only by the Chinese against Africans in China but also by African Americans and Europeans, who display a lack of interest in fully engaging with my story of blackness. This is particularly ironical considering the overwhelming support which Chinese netizens have shown the Black Lives Matter movement in America, with the protests in America and across the world receiving massive airplay on national Chinese news outlets.

When tenant evictions started happening in Guangzhou, however, it was through friends and families abroad that most found out what was happening. The horrific racism against Africans did not receive any news coverage beyond the government's denial after international news outlets started reporting about it. The same government that called racism in America a social ill remained silent as its own citizens shared racist, xenophobic sentiments against Africans evictees in Guangzhou.

Anyone, regardless of race or nationality, can display a geographical ignorance of the world and the peoples that inhabit it. But this classification of nationalities and races by Chinese society has ensured that certain groups achieve and maintain superiority over others. The "Native English Speakers", whether black or white, possess that thing so desired by China's *nouveau riche*; to become an English speaker and thus attain the ultimate status of upward social mobility and be welcomed into the Anglophone world, portrayed as the world of the accomplished.

Africa is a massive continent with a population of 1.4 billion people. We come from 55 countries that are as distinct in their populations as they are in their cultural compositions and heritages. To some extent, one might describe African nations more as confederacies of distinct ethnic groups under various national flags rather than a united body of Africans.

Every crisis presents an opportunity. As African Americans confront systemic racism, Kenyans are also turning their attention to our own political history. In various WeChat groups, Kenyans in China are engaged in fervent discussions, expressing their political hopes for the future. It is to these groups that Kenyans turned when their situation was dire in places like Guangzhou and Shenzhen, receiving help from fellow Kenyans when the Kenyan embassy was slow to act. And it was to these same groups that those stranded in China—unable to afford the Sh80,000 airfare for repatriation—turned for donations when they were told in no uncertain terms that *ndege sio matatu*, you shouldn't expect to catch a flight as you would a minibus taxi. In Kenyan WeChat groups, members are spoiling for a revolution of some kind. We all want change, but it falls apart at the seams when mention is made of tribe or political party affiliation. Yet we know that our silence and our refusal to engage with issues of social justice, equality and corrupt systems will not save us.

A disturbing event recently took place that fully encapsulates the terror of being black and African in China. In Kenyan and African groups across the country, people began sharing the photos and videos of Eric Jackson, a Ghanaian man who was turned away from four hospitals due to fears that he had COVID-19. A hospital eventually took him in but it was too late. Jackson died while undergoing treatment. He died of cardiac arrest. Videos of Jackson's agonising last moments, and of his corpse on a gurney at what I speculate to be the entrance to a morgue, were a stark reminder of our place in this country. It was a terrifying manifestation of the Chinese rejection of our colour and

our race. In one of the videos, his friend is heard pleading to be let into the hospital in fluent Chinese but the guard at the gate refuses and sends them away. He is heard asking, “Is this not a hospital? Do you not treat sick people here?”, and getting no response.

This incident knocked the air out of my lungs. To a smaller but yet equally profound extent, Jackson became our George Floyd, not dying under the knee of a racist cop, but under the crushing weight of a deeply racist and complacent system denying him a duty of care. In the Kenyan WeChat group, an outpouring of grief was followed by an important question; even if Jackson was dying of COVID-19, did he not deserve to be treated? Had he been a Chinese national, or even white, would he have been turned away? COVID-19 was the pretext for medical professionals to not only shirk their responsibility, but for individuals to go against that very human instinct of preserving a human life under threat. Jackson was denied medical help because to them his black skin and his origin meant his life wasn't worth saving. Jackson wasn't worth fretting over, and his death was not a loss. His friend's desperate pleas, in their own language, did nothing to weaken their resolve.

We all recognised in that moment that Jackson was us and we were him. That could have been my dead body on a gurney somewhere in the south of China. Those could have been my final moments captured on short WeChat video clips for the world to see. That could have been my life devalued and ultimately lost because I was born black and African.

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