

“Rising China”: Of washing powder, Afrophobia and racism in China

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Roughly two months have passed since the Qiaobi detergent advertisement went viral. The advert, in which a Chinese woman shoves a black man into a washing machine only for him to emerge as a shiny, clean, Asian man, prompted Western media to call it “the most racist ad ever” [1]. At the height of the controversy, commentators from all over the world quarrelled endlessly over whether or not the advert was evidence of China being a racist society. Eventually, the Chinese government intervened [2] and the company behind the offensive advert issued an apology [3].

Across my social and academic networks, the ad caused a major storm [4]. Everyone from traders to academics and advertisers weighed in. With tensions running high, African traders in Guangzhou were quick to point out that Chinese ignorance in race-related matters was probably behind the advert.

Academics debated the need to “contextualise” racism and racial prejudice in China. They also highlighted how international media tend to portray China and the Chinese in a negative light (especially in the context of Sino-African relations [5]). At the same time, advertisers pointed out that adverts like the Qiaobi one are influenced by the long history of racist advertising in the West [6]. They also explained that the advert showed how Chinese advertisers were unaware that their adverts could have a global reach.

Racialism and a rising China

Despite the fact that “race” as a biological category was discredited long ago [7], racial thinking or “racialism” is still common in China. Racialism is the belief that humans are naturally divided into biological categories called “races”. Sometimes, the term racialism is used interchangeably with “racism” to mean a race-based way of thinking through human differences.

Contemporary racial thinking in China is informed by historical ways of imagining “otherness”. These ways centre around differences such as skin colour, class and “ethnicity”. Contact with 19th-century European colonialism and racial theories was also influential. More recently, the “rise of China” [8] within the context of global consumerist societies has stirred up ethno-nationalist sentiments that affect how Chinese people think about “race”.

In China, like other places, racial thinking is often accompanied by stereotypes and prejudices. Dark skin, for instance, is often seen negatively. This is something many of us foreigners have to live with in China.

Within this context, the Qiaobi advert was seen by some as proof that there's racism in China, and as evidence that "Afrophobia" was on the rise [9]. Those who "see" Afrophobia are quick to point to Chinese hiring practices, which prefer white foreigners to black ones [10].

Any non-white foreigner living in China knows that these practices do not only discriminate against black people. They extend to other dark-skinned people. So, while deplorable, it's not exactly Afrophobia.

Despite little concrete evidence supporting claims of Afrophobia or "Anti-African" campaigns, these claims are often picked up by Western media [11]. Some journalists seem all too ready to cast China and the Chinese as "racist" and Africans as the poor victims with no agency. This pattern is replicated in coverage of China as a "neo-colonial" power in Africa [12].

To equate Chinese rac(ial)ism with racism in the West is intellectually and historically dishonest. Rac(ial)ism and racial prejudice in China are still far from producing the exploitation, oppression, discrimination and murder that racist worldviews continue to produce in the West.

In short, while there are deep-seated forms of rac(ial)ism in China, the rise of "Afrophobia" is difficult to prove. The issue is much more complex than that.

'Race' and racism in global media

In most of the articles and comments following the offensive Chinese advert, people from all over the world used the terms racism, stereotypes and racial prejudice interchangeably. It quickly became clear to me that we haven't figured out how to talk about "race" and racism in globally inclusive ways.

The conversation is usually dominated by the American ways of talking about "race" and racism. Needless to say, using the black/white binary paradigm of race as a measuring stick for racial issues in global and non-Western settings is problematic. If the many "racist" comments I've heard from African men about their Chinese counterparts is any guide, the problems highlighted by the Qiaobi advert are far more complex than what the American binary suggests.

Figuring out who's the racist, or if *this* or *that* is racist, or if the Chinese are racist, is a waste of time. Rather than being black or white, it's a complex matrix of practices that reproduce global systems of exploitation and oppression. Despite our skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, "race", nationality or faith, we are all, to different degrees, participants in these systems.

White supremacy the Chinese way?

As pointed out early on during the Qiaobi controversy, the advert is a revamped iteration of old Western racist tropes [13]. To understand why such iterations emerge in China – and elsewhere in Asia – it's important to look at how contemporary global media imaginations are influenced by long-standing racial theories [14] and ideas [15]. Enter white supremacy.

As I write this piece, a tram covered in advertising stops in front of me on Shipyard Lane in Quarry Bay, Hong Kong. In the advert, a young, handsome, white guy in a suit is levitating in front of a building. The Chinese words next to him are about leadership and success.

On the next tram a blonde woman wearing a Swarovski ring is being admired by a young white man.

Any survey of street advertising in this, or any other big Asian city, will show that white bodies are pervasively used as the markers of success, power, beauty and romance [16].

It is hardly news that global media are deeply shaped by a racial hierarchy that frames whiteness as a superior state of being. What I find fascinating is how these racially informed imaginations are negotiated by people in China when they imagine themselves and the world they live in.

These negotiations have to be factored in against the backdrop of the “rise of China” – a rise that has led many to believe that the country will take up the reins of the global capitalist system.

I believe that there are few indications that China would be willing (or able) to transform the (old imperial, capitalist, white supremacist and patriarchal) structures and practices that inform contemporary capitalism and that are, ultimately, behind the Qiaobi detergent advert.

For me, these reflections were the main takeaways amid the uproar that followed the advert controversy.

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P.S.

* “Of washing powder, Afrophobia and racism in China”. The Conversation. August 11, 2016 8.40pm BST:

<https://theconversation.com/of-washing-powder-afrophobia-and-racism-in-china-60274>

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Footnotes

[1] http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/qiaobi-chinese-laundry-detergent-brand-may-have-made-the-most-racist-advert-ever_uk_5746fd99e4b0ebf6a329590d?ckfvsavx6oli35wmi

[2] <http://blogs.wsj.com/chinarealtime/2016/05/30/chinese-detergent-makers-full-translated-apology-for-allegedly-racist-ad/>

[3] http://shanghaiist.com/2016/05/29/qiaobi_issues_apology_statement_racist_ad.php

[4] <https://africansinchina.net/compilation-opinion-and-analysis-pieces-about-the-notorious-racist-chinese-ad/>

[5] <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/qa-why-western-media-so-biased-against-china-africa-eric-olander->

[6] <https://www.buzzfeed.com/babymantis/racism-in-30-vintage-ads-1opu>

- [7] <https://theconversation.com/how-the-origin-of-the-khoisan-tells-us-that-race-has-no-place-in-human-ancestry-53594>
- [8] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2008-01-01/rise-china-and-future-west>
- [9] <https://blacklivesinchina.wordpress.com/2016/05/29/why-the-racist-chinese-ad-may-be-just-as-racist-as-you-think/>
- [10] <https://blacklivesinchina.wordpress.com/2016/05/29/why-the-racist-chinese-ad-may-be-just-as-racist-as-you-think/>
- [11] http://abonnes.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2016/05/30/en-chine-beaucoup-d-africains-souffrent-de-racisme_4928893_3212.html?xtmc=le_belzic&xtcr=9
- [12] <http://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/19/08/2014/new-neo-colonialism-africa>
- [13] http://shanghaiist.com/2016/05/26/racist_laundry_detergent_ad.php
- [14] http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/faculty/winant/Race_and_Race_Theory.html
- [15] <http://leneeson.com/2014/03/19/media-images-girls-and-identity/>
- [16] <http://www.highsnobiety.com/2016/05/02/asian-fashion-brands-white-models/>