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The semiotics of Heiren (黑人): race, everyday language, and discursive complicities in a Chinese migrant community

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ABSTRACT

Among Chinese migrants in Tanzania, “Heiren (黑人)” (black person/people) is a ubiquitous term with many referents, encapsulating everyone from labourers to state officials, and ranging from an ethno-racial category to an individual pronoun. In English translation, the term bears on a contentious debate regarding racialisation in Africa-China relations. In this paper, based on seventeen months of fieldwork among Chinese migrants in Tanzania, I examine racialisation in everyday discourse, and also the politics of (white) ethnographic reportage on (non-white) racism. I focus on the social lives of the word heiren among Chinese, examining how it is deployed in heterogenous social situations and discursive contexts. I argue that the use of ‘Heiren’ flattens otherwise heterogeneous experiences with and attitudes towards Tanzanians, contributing to the construction of an African other. Specifically, talking about Heiren becomes a way that economically privileged but politically vulnerable Chinese migrants talk about the tense relations they have with Tanzanians. However, I argue the significance of Heiren talk is not that it defines ‘the Chinese’ in isolation as ‘racist’, but rather how it becomes discursively complicit with global anti-blackness.

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During a portion of my fieldwork among Chinese migrants in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, I lived in a small hotel located in a historically Indian middle-class neighbourhood. The hotel was operated by a Chinese family and catered primarily to Chinese guests. In online advertisements, it was specified that the neighbourhood was a *Yinba diqu* (印巴地區, Indian-Pakistan neighbourhood). The landlords of the property, however, were themselves an African family. The hotel attracted varied guests from China who stayed anywhere from a few days to as long as a year. They included investors, SOE employees, contract miners, sailors, travel bloggers, student volunteers, and academic researchers. Some had been to Tanzania before, others had been elsewhere in Africa, but for many, being here was their first time not only in Africa, but also out of China. The hotel was a space where a heterogeneous set of individuals with varied levels of local knowledge and international experience interacted and exchanged information.

In conversations, I would often hear Chinese-speakers use the word Heiren (黑人, black person/people). Coming from the United States, this term leaped out to me,

because, translating it in my head as ‘black people’, it had racial connotations. This was reinforced by the space itself. Although some African residents did live in the neighbourhood, most notably the hotel’s landlords, the majority of black Africans one met on the street tended to be security guards and drivers. The division between the street and private space by gates, walls, security guards, and courtyards was more pronounced than other neighbourhoods. The few Tanzanians inside the hotel were a couple of house-cleaners and a driver. The only African guests I met were Africans from China or other countries accompanying Chinese business partners. Meeting with Tanzanian business partners or customers *within* the hotel was discouraged. The hotel’s front gate was likewise locked during the day, and both guests, visitors, and employees needed to knock each time they entered or wanted to leave. The explanation for this arrangement was *anquan* (安全, security).

The system created difficulties because the evening security guard often fell asleep. One evening, I was in my room when I heard a loud banging outside at the front gate. I looked out and saw the landlord’s daughter trying to get the security guard’s attention so she could exit. She was soon joined by the Chinese manager. The two of them eventually woke the security guard, and I watched the daughter sternly lecture the man for a few minutes. After she left, the Chinese manager walked back into the hotel. As they came up the stairs, I heard one of the Chinese guests ask them what happened. They replied that the guard had fallen asleep, adding, ‘Heiren are like this’ (黑人是这样的, *Heiren shi zheyang de*).

Who is a Heiren? If Heiren simply means ‘black person’, then both the security guard and the woman who criticised the guard are Heiren. However, when reporting the encounter, the Chinese manager characterised the guard’s actions as an index of being Heiren: ‘Black people are like this’. The woman’s presence, and her own relationship to the guard disappear from the story, and none of her actions were signified as indices of any identity.

Among Chinese migrants in Tanzania, Heiren is a ubiquitous term with many referents, encapsulating everyone from labourers to state officials. In English translation, such language might support the claim that Chinese migrants racialize Africans. However, generalised claims that ‘the Chinese’ are ‘racist’ itself participates in racialized generalisations about the ‘the Chinese’.¹ Conversely, arguments that Chinese discourses about Africans can’t be assumed ‘racial’ because the Chinese context is different elides what Lan calls the ‘global circulation of racial knowledge’.² In this paper, based on seventeen months of fieldwork among Chinese migrants in Tanzania,³ I examine racialisation as a process by exploring the everyday use of the word Heiren (黑人, black person/black people). I argue that the use of the term flattens otherwise heterogeneous experiences with and attitudes towards black Tanzanians, contributing to the construction of an African other. Specifically, talking about Heiren becomes a way that economically privileged but politically vulnerable Chinese migrants talk about the tense relations they have with Tanzanians. However, I argue the significance of Heiren talk is not in proving ‘the Chinese’ are ‘racist’, but rather that the discourse they produce is discursively complicit with global anti-blackness.

Naming and debating ‘Race’ in Africa–China Relations

Race is a contentious topic in Africa–China studies. Ethnographers encountering examples of ‘racism’ during fieldwork have to contend with two duelling claims: on

the one side, the argument that anti-black racism in China shapes Chinese attitudes and behaviour towards Africans⁴; on the other side, the argument that non-Chinese seeing anti-black racism in China are (at least partially) projecting Western experiences onto incommensurable Chinese contexts.⁵ The debate matters because it relates to the question of whether Africa–China relations challenge or reproduce global racial hierarchies. In this paper, I follow recent scholarship which examines racialisation in Africa–China relations as an ‘uneven’ process.⁶ I examine how Chinese migrants in Tanzania collaboratively and discursively construct an African other through the use of the word *Heiren* (black person/people). I argue that what makes this discourse ultimately ‘racial’ is not the speaker’s conceptualisation of ‘race’, or even the word *Hei* (black) itself, but how the discourse in circulation becomes complicit with global anti-black racism.

‘Global anti-blackness’ is a concept often used by academics and activists, but not always explicitly defined. It points foremost to repetitive examples of anti-black discourses and practices around the world, including China. As Pierre argues, ‘persistent global anti-blackness is real and easily demonstrated’.⁷ Theorists of anti-blackness have not argued it is ‘universal’ or ‘transhistorical’, but rather the historical product, and even foundation, of global capitalism and Western colonial modernity.⁸ With the empirical discussion based primarily on the West, and the United States in particular, evidence of anti-black racism in contemporary China is either mobilised as a conservative argument that racism is not directly related to the West, or as an argument for the hegemony of Western colonial modernity in Chinese nationalism. Dikotter argued that a modern Chinese discourse of race emerged at the turn of the twentieth century combining *both* extant indigenous prejudices and European racial discourses embraced by late Qing intellectual reformers and revolutionaries.⁹ Despite limited direct contacts between China and Africa, the latter entered Chinese intellectual discourse at this time as a critical foil for imagining China’s rejuvenation.¹⁰ Accepting Western racial categories, Chinese reformers challenged white supremacy while reaffirming anti-black racism insofar they argued the ‘yellow race’, in contrast to the ‘black race’, possessed the innate capacity to equal or surpass the ‘white race’.¹¹

Discourses about racial hierarchy were officially repudiated after 1949, replaced by discourses about Third World solidarity and official opposition to racism.¹² Following the beginning of Reform in the 1980s, however, a discourse of racial nationalism re-emerged, centred first among predominantly male Chinese students protesting the assumed privileges shown to African countries, students, and migrants by the government, and claiming to ‘protect’ Han women from African men.¹³ This later migrated online, where anti-black discourses continue to predominate, often linked to Han racial nationalism.¹⁴ Hood, in a broad survey of Chinese media, argues that images of ‘black Africa’, drawing on both negative meanings of ‘Hei’ in Chinese society and Western media stereotypes of Africa, have widely circulated in China.¹⁵

Proponents of so-called ‘Afropessimism’ would not be surprised that Chinese racial nationalism entailed self-distancing from blackness because they argue it has played a foundational role as the negative pole for the global Western colonial modernity even non-Western states have strived for.¹⁶ Africa–China scholars, however, have often been resistant to employing critical racial theories developed in the West to interpret the specificities of the Africa–China context. As Castillo notes, in academic settings, it is ‘Western audiences [who] often racialize conversations about Africa and China’.¹⁷

For example, critics argue that discussions of anti-black racism in China have often privileged the writings of late Qing intellectuals and contemporary online racism.¹⁸ Lan argues that using these sources to make conclusions about the ‘Chinese’ perspectives on race privileges ‘elite Chinese perspectives and fail[s] to reflect on the influence of Western racial ideology in shaping elite constructions of African “inferiority.”’¹⁹ Furthermore, it singularises Chinese attitudes, marginalising other Chinese voices and experiences.²⁰ Some argue that the history of Mao-era discourses and practices of Third World Solidarity have left cultural traces which are still relevant. For example, as Keisha Brown argues, blackness in China during the Mao years became ‘imbued with ideas about international solidarity’.²¹

Lan argues that racialisation is a *process*, and in contemporary China, the racialisation of black Africans has been ‘uneven’.²² The other end of this argument is the argument of Li Anshan that anti-black prejudice in China reflects traditional ‘ethnocentrism’ based on ignorance rather than systemic racism.²³ While some scholars like Chen Yinghong criticise such a position as Chinese exceptionalism,²⁴ even if one accepts Li’s argument, it still implies a liberal optimism which reduces anti-black racism to cultural prejudice, and assumes that deepening ties between Chinese and Africans will reduce such attitudes because they will reduce ignorance about the other.²⁵

The problem with this argument is that contemporary interactions between Chinese and Africans can also produce the opposite effect. Examining whether interactions deconstruct or reinforce the racialisation of the other means asking questions about the nature of the interactions themselves. Ethnographic studies of Chinese migrants in Africa have shown a complex portrait of power relations as being non-isomorphic and multi-directional.²⁶ For example, China is more powerful politically and economically than its African partners. Furthermore, Chinese migrants in Africa frequently enter into relationships with ordinary Africans as employers or supervisors. However, this does not mean Chinese migrants are privileged actors in all circumstances. On the contrary, Chinese migrants in Africa are often vulnerable to exploitation by local brokers and representatives of the state.

Chinese migrants may be economically privileged vis-à-vis ordinary Africans, but they are also politically vulnerable, a condition Chinese migrants actually share with other so-called ‘middleman minorities’.²⁷ For many Chinese migrants, relative economic privilege and political vulnerability come together alongside a suspicion of social ‘outsiders’ to generate a prevalent concern about ‘security’.²⁸ When Chinese migrants worry about ‘Heiren’, they are often talking about either ‘thieves’ or ‘government officials’ seeking to expropriate them of money and property. As recent studies of race and racism in Africa–China relations have shown, this shapes the consequences of racialisation in complicated ways because those who are racializing and those who are racialized yield different forms of power, and this all unfolds under a global racial hierarchy which continues to privilege whiteness.²⁹ As Sautman and Yan have argued, it is not only the Chinese who racialize the African other, but that Africans also racialize the Chinese other, and both are racialized vis-à-vis ‘the West’.³⁰ Lan argues that ‘anti-black racism in China cannot be interpreted within the traditionally black and white binary and must be situated within the larger context of the triangular power relations between China, Africa, and the West’.³¹

However, the argument that what Sautman and Yan call ‘South-South racialization’³² is distinct from white–black racialisation can easily veer into the problematic claim that anti-black and anti-Chinese racism are historically equivalent. Sautman and Yan even argue that Chinese migrants ‘lack political power’ or ‘cultural hegemony’ over their African hosts unlike African governments that ‘can regulate, racialize or even expel Chinese’.³³ The problem with this argument, as Huynh and Park point out, is that it reduces racism in Africa–China relations to a simple calculus of “who” has the power to define difference and structure hierarchies’.³⁴ However, even if Chinese migrants produce anti-black discourse from a position of structural disadvantage (at least in some situations) when complaining about corrupt ‘black’ officials seeking bribes, the cultural generalisations they engage with in discourse with others becomes complicit, intentionally or not, with a longer history of global anti-black discourse; specifically what Pierre calls ‘racial vernaculars’ that criminalise the African state.³⁵

The perspective I take in this article attempts to reconcile a recognition of the dangers of unreflectively applying theories of racism to Africa–China interactions with a recognition that evidence from Africa–China relations also proves that ‘persistent global anti-blackness is real and easily demonstrated’.³⁶ I do so by focusing on racialisation as a process. Specifically, the approach I take is inspired by linguistic and semiotic anthropology, namely Jane Hill’s analysis of racialisation in everyday language,³⁷ and Paul Kockelman’s semiotic approach to the ‘epistemologies of the everyday’.³⁸ I adopt this approach to understand racialisation because it connects empirical sensitivity to everyday interactions between Chinese migrants and Tanzanians with historical sensitivity to racial discourse and so-called ‘global anti-blackness’. A linguistic/semiotic approach reveals how Chinese migrants in Tanzania make sense of their everyday experiences through ordinary language. This is why I focus on the Chinese term *heiren* (black person), because it is both an ordinary term of everyday conversation, and one which, by drawing attention to the ‘blackness’ of the individual, gestures to the heritage of anti-blackness. This is similar to what Lan calls ‘racial learning’,³⁹ but I am also interested in problematising how the category of ‘black person’ is constructed in the first place. I focus on the term itself, whose usage is frequently downplayed in ethnographic accounts of China–Africa interactions, or cited as evidence of ‘race language’ without defining what ‘race’ actually means in context.⁴⁰ In doing so, I highlight more subtle practices of othering often missed by the attention given to more explicitly ‘racist’ discourse. Hill’s approach to racialisation stresses how individuals can participate in the reproduction of racial inequality without recognising themselves as ‘racist’. However, I also want to resist naturalising anti-blackness as inevitable. I argue that while the etymology of ‘Hei’ is relevant to understanding ‘Heiren’, such exercises often neglect the pragmatics of these words in ordinary use. I argue that how Chinese speakers use *heiren* is different, and may even be less ‘racial’ than how English speakers use and understand *black*, but is nonetheless complicit in the reproduction of a racial discourse through the ways the term is mobilised to make sense of Chinese migrant experiences in Africa using a discourse which unfortunately resonates with ‘racial vernaculars’.⁴¹ I argue the reproduction of an anti-black discourse is not automatic; indeed there seems to be points where it might go a different direction. How it gets reproduced is precisely the puzzle I try to explore.

Adopting Kockelman’s semiotic terminology, I focus on how Chinese-speakers construct, or ‘thematize’, *Heiren* as a category, and then how they talk about (or

‘characterize’) this category.⁴² I argue that Chinese migrants characterise ‘Heiren’ in terms of the varied frictions they encounter as both economically privileged and politically vulnerable in an environment marked by insecurity and distrust. I emphasise how these meanings are produced collaboratively among Chinese migrants in conversation with each other. Commentaries about the character of Tanzanians may not be ‘racist’ in isolation, but becomes ‘racist’ once it enters into dialogue with other discourses. This is what I mean by ‘discursive complicity’, participation in racist discourse without necessarily recognising oneself as being ‘racist’. It is important to make that distinction because debates over Chinese (and not just Chinese) racism have often devolved into moral judgements about individuals and nations, allowing a serious discussion about racism in China to be avoided.

As an ethnographer listening in on these discourses and writing about them, the discussion of discursive complicity *also* requires considering my own role. Multiple Chinese scholars like to point out during conferences that Westerners seem to have a fixation on race. I therefore have to reflect on why and how I fixated on this. Recognising ‘Chinese’ racism towards Africans as a white anthropologist involves uncanny encounters with stereotypes found in ‘white racism’. Yet, the discourse of ‘Chinese racism’, in erasing this, ‘is part of a broader discourse about the asymmetry of power – specifically, who gets to make statements about whom’.⁴³ It is for that reason that I strive to maintain my presence visible in the ethnography. Furthermore, as a participant-observer living with Chinese interlocutors, my very presence near their conversations, my silences, are also forms of complicity. Scholars with other racial and gendered identifications have had different field experiences.⁴⁴ I hope recognising these complicities can move the discussion beyond the geopolitics of comparative racisms to examining how, aspirationally, Africa–China relations might actually deconstruct rather than reproduce racism.

Making Heiren in everyday speech

My discussion is based on seventeen months of ethnographic fieldwork among Chinese migrants in Tanzania. Chinese migrants regularly refer to Tanzanians among themselves as *Heiren* or *Bendiren* (locals). Tanzania is only one of fifty-four African countries where Chinese migrants interact with people known as Heiren, and Chinese can also meet ‘Heiren’ in Europe, North America, and China itself. Despite the diversity of contexts and peoples, ‘Heiren’ appears in many locations and is interconnected through circulating online discourses.⁴⁵ The homogeneity of the term as a point of reference and an ontological given exists in tension with the heterogeneity of experiences and opinions.

The Chinese in Tanzania are themselves heterogeneous. The assistance of the Chinese state in constructing the Tanzania-Zambia railway in the 1970s, and Tanzania’s role in China’s ascension to the United Nations in 1971 is still celebrated in diplomatic rituals today as evidence of ‘Sino-Tanzanian Friendship’.⁴⁶ The earliest Chinese economic activities in independent Tanzania were state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Starting in the late 1990s and early 2000s, traders, many from southern China, came to sell manufactured goods, some of whom later diversified into other sectors like manufacturing and construction. A few became wealthy and started business and hometown associations. Both larger state-owned and private companies followed them in the early 2010s.

The international experience of Chinese in Tanzania vary from those with college educations and international experience to those who have never finished high school and are travelling outside of China for the first time. It is, therefore, dangerous to make general claims about 'Chinese' views of Africans, and among Chinese migrants themselves, there is a variation of attitudes regarding Africans. Nonetheless, Chinese also share similar stories which, in conversational settings, tended to create consensus. In interviews, I encountered migrants who criticised the anti-African views of other Chinese as evidence of those migrants' lack of cosmopolitan experience. Nonetheless, I observed that shared experiences of being in an unfamiliar country, and interactions with officials, employees, and business partners produced conversations and casual statements that generalised Heiren.

Heiren is an important category in the ontology of Chinese migrant lifeworlds. Kockelman defines *ontology* semiotically as 'an agent's assumptions as to the *indices*, *kinds*, and *individuals* that constitute a particular world'.⁴⁷ *Indices* are signs in the world that drive interpretations; markers or experiences that 'point' agents towards particular actions or interpretations. These can range from skin colour to particular behaviours. *Kinds* are categories like Heiren. In Kockelman's words, 'Ontologies drive interpretation ... by your index (sign), I may infer your kind (object), and thereby come to expect (interpretant) other indices that would be in keeping with your kind (insofar as I have a particular ontology)'.⁴⁸ Chinese-speakers frequently constitute Heiren as a kind with propositions that naturalise them. Every propositional statement involves both 'theme' and 'character'. Thematisation is to 'determine what the proposition is "about"'. Characterisation is to 'determine what properties are attributed to this theme', or 'what we say regarding what we talk about'.⁴⁹ Chinese-speakers thematize Heiren and characterise them in particular ways.

Thematisation is fundamental because although Chinese-speakers may say either good or bad things about Heiren, they have less control over the term itself. Heiren is comparable to other ethnonyms like *wai guoren* (外國人, foreigner), *Ribenren* (日本人, Japanese), or *bairen* (白人, white person/people). However, skin colour is marked by the character 黑 (*Hei*, black).

In other contexts, 'black' has negative meanings, indicating illegal or illicit activities, individuals, and institutions: *heiche* (黑車, unregistered taxi), *heixin* (黑心, adulterated 'black-hearted' products), *heishoudang* (黑手黨, gangsters), or simply someone without household registration (黑戶, *heihu*). Hood argues that such negative meanings have extended to media representations of 'black Africa'.⁵⁰ In ordinary use, however, many Chinese-speakers consider the use of Heiren to talk about Africans to be convention, with no intended negative connotations.⁵¹ From the perspective of linguistic anthropology, the meaning of words in spoken context is important, but a literary perspective alerts us to inadvertent resonances. For example, a Chinese mechanic one evening was telling me 'Africa is very black' (非洲很黑, *Feizhou hen hei*). He continued with commentary regarding official corruption, suggesting that his use of 'black' was similar to its general meanings, rather than a reference to skin colour.⁵² Nonetheless, he inadvertently rearticulated a 'racial vernacular' about the African state using the same signifier also used for skin colour.⁵³

The significance of the term Heiren, however, for understanding the lives of Chinese migrants in Africa, is not to be found primarily in the meanings of 'Black', but rather the

use of Heiren itself. The term itself constitutes a category of people. It is not inevitable that Chinese-speakers must refer to a person or peoples as Heiren; they also refer to them as Tanzanians, Kenyans, police officers, drivers, employees, or friends. Heiren homogenises them under a single label, referencing an imagined ethnoracial category (Black/Black person). In 2014, a former Chinese exchange student in Tanzania published an article in a Chinese-language newspaper entitled ‘How to Get Along with African Black People,’ ostensibly aiming to challenge Chinese stereotypes, but at the same time treating Heiren as a distinct *minzu* (民族, nation/race) with common physical attributes and cultural ways of thinking.⁵⁴ Not all uses of Heiren are as explicitly elaborated, and Chinese with more experience in Africa recognise differences among Africans, but it is still conventional to use the term and category Heiren.

Heiren can also be used to reference individuals. For example, Chinese-speakers who wanted to direct someone’s attention to a Tanzanian would refer to the latter as ‘Heiren’. Once, when I was looking for the laundry machine at a hotel, a Chinese guest advised me to ‘give your laundry to [the] Heiren’, meaning one of the female hotel staff. Even if the person knows the name, if an introduction has not been made with a third party, they may still refer to them as Heiren. For example, a busy shopkeeper once encouraged me to ‘talk to [the] Heiren’, meaning his shop assistant, while he attended his business.

Whether singular or plural, for Chinese living and working in Tanzania, the term Heiren is used to refer to a heterogeneous set of referents. Heiren is what we might call a ‘shifter’, a term whose reference shifts depending on the context of the utterance.⁵⁵ For example, when I once asked a Chinese business owner if their business was profitable, they complained, ‘[I] give it all to Black people to eat’ (都给黑人吃, *dou gei Heiren chi*). I learned that what they meant was paying bribes to the Tanzanian government officials who regularly came around for surprise inspections to ‘look for problems’ (找麻烦, *zhao mafan*).

One of the effects on ordinary discourse is that when employees, friends, customers, government officials, security guards, police, or even thieves are being characterised, it is Heiren that are being characterised as such; and particular relationships have an over-determined capacity to define Heiren. For example, the Chinese migrants I know were often in employer and/or supervisory roles vis-à-vis Tanzanians. I therefore often encountered Heiren being used in contexts where ‘employee’ or ‘worker’ might have been substituted. For example, some phrases I recorded include:

The air conditioner is broken. The manager was supposed to get a Heiren to fix it.

Get a Heiren to go up into the roof and pull the wire across.

I let Heiren manage that.

To compare, Tanzanians use a diverse set of referents when describing other Tanzanians. A Tanzanian roommate, for example, might have instructed me to give my laundry to ‘sister’ (*dada*).⁵⁶ Tanzanians likewise homogenise, but when talking about Tanzanians, they are more specific in scope. This explains how Tanzanian and Chinese narratives of the same events can sound very different. For example, in the opening vignette, if it was the landlord’s daughter who had been asked about the sleeping security guard, she would have likely not said ‘Blacks are like this’.

This is consequential for how Chinese migrants characterise Tanzanian society. For example, I found that Chinese and ordinary Tanzanians frequently shared similar discontents about state officials, but whereas Tanzanians categorise these problems as *serikali*, (government) or *viongozi*, (leaders), Chinese migrants tended to define these actors as 'Heiren'.

To be sure, ordinary Tanzanians also aggregate the Chinese as *Mchina/Wachina*. They also use *Mchina* not only as a shifter, but also as a direct address when getting the attention of a Chinese person. An important difference between these two cases, however, is that most Tanzanians don't have direct interactions with Chinese people. Almost all Chinese migrants, however, must interact on a regular basis in some degree with Tanzanians. It is significant that the kinds of people who get categorised, and then, complained about, as Heiren, are the kinds of people who can make life easy or difficult for the Chinese from contrasting positions of power: Tanzanian employees from below, and Tanzanian officials from above. The condition of being economically privileged while politically vulnerable nonetheless becomes classified in ordinary discourse, however, as things Heiren do to them.

This is not inevitable. For example, an NGO study interviewing Chinese and American business people in Kenya found that despite articulating similar views about Kenyan society, Chinese interviewees would use the term 'Heiren', but Americans (race not specified) did not call Kenyans 'Blacks'.⁵⁷ If one only considers terminology, it may appear the Chinese racialize Kenyans more than the Americans do. However, as Jane Hill studied, white Americans articulate racist discourse while at the same time denying (and even disbelieving) they are being racist. This is expressed in coded language (ex. 'inner-city' rather than Heiren diqu (黑人地区, black district, a term I have also heard among Chinese-speakers in North America). What is important to Hill's argument is not racists 'hiding' themselves, but rather how white Americans disassociate themselves from complicity with racism.⁵⁸ For example, a white American friend of mine who lived in a fishing town in Tanzania once described their closest social networks as primarily 'Indian' and 'Arab', and less connected to the 'fishermen'. Given the context, 'fishermen' meant Africans, not all of whom are involved in fishing.

Among the Chinese in Tanzania, however, the term Heiren does not invoke the same historical baggage that 'black' does for white speakers. This is partially because the problem of 'racism' (种族主义, *zhongzuzhuyi*) is considered, if not just to be a Western historical problem, then a matter of personal prejudice. The construction of Heiren itself as an historical category is not problematised, and it is the translation itself, from Heiren into 'black person', and the presence of a non-Chinese public, that contributes to the problematization of the word. For example, I was once sitting with a group of young Chinese men. They were talking about the word 'Heiren', and one of them imagined translating the term into English in the context of hailing a stranger: 'Hey, you black colored person!' The man hesitated, and glanced over to me. He then told me they were joking, continuing in English, that this 'is not discrimination. If there's no problem, that's fine, but if you think there is a problem, then that's bad'.

This was one of the few times I heard Chinese-speakers in Tanzania deconstructing the word. My presence was also important. Recognising the potential awkwardness, the speaker took an equivocal stance, shifting the burden to me, a white person, to make a judgement. This raises the problem of the unmarked 'white' observer of

‘Chinese’ racism. Lan has observed how Western translations of Chinese representations of blackness tend to blur the subtle differences between contexts, assimilating ‘color-based prejudice’ into ‘Western racial ideology’.⁵⁹ Although the use of Heiren is generally unmarked and therefore not apparently ‘racial’, in immediate context, people do recognise commensurabilities in translation: Heiren becomes ‘racial’ when put in dialogue with racial discourses.

However, it is not just the term but also specific forms of knowledge distinct to everyday interactions and experience where Heiren is taken up as an explanation for the differences and insecurities migrants face in the Africa-China context.

‘Heiren are like this’: orientating newcomers

For Chinese who come to Africa, Heiren are key actors in their ‘epistemology of the everyday.’⁶⁰ Chinese may arrive with prior stereotypes about Africa, but the body of knowledge Chinese migrants subsequently develop is not simply ignorance being dispelled by experience, but also new knowledge mediated through discussion with other speakers.

This is most conspicuous for Chinese who come as employees, and have to rely on their bosses, managers, or more senior colleagues for guidance, but even those who arrive to ‘do business’ (做生意, *zuo shengyi*) for the first time have either been invited there by friends or family with longer-standing links, or already know people. Combined sometimes with limited confidence or ability in English (not to mention Kiswahili), it is from other migrants that most newcomers first seek knowledge about Tanzania. If they are taken to restaurants and meet other Chinese, their circle of information will expand. QQ, WeChat, and blogs are also sources for information even before they arrive.

Chinese migrants frequently ‘teach’ others about Heiren. We may call these lessons *orientations* in the figurative sense of ‘bring(ing) into a defined relationship with known facts, circumstances’.⁶¹ These orientations are informal, punctuated, and sometimes unprompted, including practical advice (how to get things done), warnings, and middlebrow ‘anthropological’ commentary. For example, one night while driving in a car with only Chinese-speakers, we saw a Tanzanian man dancing just outside the door of a bar. The driver, unprompted, commented to me and a new employee recently arrived from China that locals were ‘happier’ (幸福, *xingfu*) than Chinese because life was ‘simpler’. He attributed this to the supposed natural fertility of the African soil and easy availability of fruit, a folk ecological-evolutionary theory I heard several times. This is a good example of how Kockelman describes the formation of an ontology as a semiotic process; the driver has taken a sign (‘a man dancing’) as an index of the individual (man)’s kind, Heiren, and has gone further to offer an evolutionary explanation of the ‘African’ character complicit with older European colonial discourses.

Older Migrants interpret Tanzanians for the benefit of newcomers. These interpretations can be short and indirect, leaving it to the listener to draw conclusions. For example, a common phrase I heard during my fieldwork was ‘Black people are like this’ (黑人是这样的, *Heiren shi zheyang de*). The phrase was most commonly used to express discontent with people failing to meet their expectations: arriving late, truancy, productivity, or corruption; discontents often associated with labour relations or officials.

For example, I was waiting for lunch one day at a Chinese restaurant. The manager apologised to me that the food was not as varied today. The cook had been paid yesterday, and had taken an unauthorised vacation today. 'Heiren are like this', she added. On another occasion, I returned after immigration officials had been through the hotel earlier in the morning. The desk clerk told me they had to pay a bribe, adding, 'Heiren are like this'.

Based on particular experiences, the phrase associates Heiren with particular habits. The phrase homogenises heterogeneity insofar that the particular background of any situation, such as why an employee might be absent after receiving their income, is flattened and reduced to behavioural essentialism. Tanzanian employees, on the other hand, when directly asked by Chinese employers, would insist on the need for their employers to understand the situational contingencies of situations (i.e. Dar's notorious traffic, or the unexpected need to attend to the health of relatives). It became common for Chinese employers I met to dismiss these kinds of explanations as themselves indices of being Heiren, sometimes playfully adopting a Swahili formulation, 'walla-walla' (meaning to talk too much) to scold their employees.

'Heiren are like this' provides a 'good enough' explanation to migrants, flattening the complexities of Tanzanian society, especially the particular social demands on Tanzanian employees which extend beyond their encounter with Chinese as employees, drivers, or other roles. When events challenged stereotypes, however, I did not hear people say 'Heiren are like this', but rather they would individuate the person they were talking about, saying they 'were not like other Heiren'. Returning to Kockelman's semiotic terminology, this is an example of how new experiences don't always affect 'ontological transformation', changing agents' assumptions about the relationship between 'indices' (behaviours) and 'kinds' (categories); these can remain inelastic even when agents have more heterogeneous experiences.⁶²

'Zhu yi anquan': the discursive production of Heiren space

The most consequential topic of orientations for newcomers related to personal safety. Advice on how to 'watch safety' (注意安全, *zhuyi anquan*) were often delivered as a form of care for others. Newcomers are warned what not to carry in public, which neighbourhoods to avoid, and when to stay off the street. These are reinforced by personal anecdotes of strong-armed thefts or robberies. Those with experience in other African countries take a more positive view of Tanzania's safety, but even those who reassure nervous guests nonetheless amplify the sensational stories.⁶³

For Chinese employees, these are not just verbal warnings. Bosses may restrict employee mobility off-site for 'safety' reasons. At one factory, the manager restricted employees from going out at night after the factory had shut its gates. On an evening where an exception was made so that one of the recently arrived Chinese employees could drive me home after a visit, he asked me in the car, unprompted, my 'feeling' (感觉, *ganjue*) about Heiren. He explained that the manager was always warning everyone about safety. 'She makes it sound terrible', he remarked.

One of the effects of these orientations is a social, institutional, and even phenomenological discouragement of pursuing closer interactions with Tanzanians. These are often dictated by top-down power dynamics and boss-employee relationships more than

individual motivations to socialise.⁶⁴ While these produce racialized outcomes, attributing them in linear fashion to individual racial prejudice short-circuits a critical engagement with processes that are not distinctively Chinese, such as processes that facilitate ‘racist talk without racists’ in an American context.⁶⁵ The Chinese context is different, which makes tracing the reproduction of uncannily recognisable practices important. The casual association of Heiren with insecurity is one of these sites. Chinese-speakers did not need to be explicit for these meanings to be implicit. For example, a Chinese wholesaler explaining the importance of staying in the shop during Dar’s frequent power outages told me that this was ‘obvious’ (当然, *dangran*) because ‘everyone was Black’ (都是黑人, *dou shi Heiren*). These kinds of unmarked casual statements may assume either shared experiences or prior racial stereotypes unassociated with direct experiences. These statements also did not necessarily index a person’s own particular ideas about race as a category.

For example, I met many Chinese migrants who were explicitly critical of compatriots who complained about ‘Heiren this, or Heiren that’. This did not always preclude them from the unmarked use of Heiren as a sign of danger. For example, after a dinner with a couple, as I was preparing to leave, they reminded me to ‘watch safety’ (注意安全, *zhuyi anquan*) because I was going to be passing through a ‘black person district’ (黑人地区, *Heiren diqu*). What is interesting is that during our conversation over dinner, they frequently used the term ‘local’ (本地人, *bendiren*) when describing Tanzanians, a term, which although also othering, is noticeable because of the word shift which came later.

These utterances are also ‘orientations’ in the original definition meaning ‘position [ing] or align[ing] with, or in a particular way relative to, the points of the compass, or other specified points’.⁶⁶ However, the neighbourhood, which my hosts identified as ‘Heiren’, was the same predominantly and historically Indian middle-class neighbourhood as the hotel where I stayed. Tanzanians called it *wahindi* (Indian). The hotel manager even advertised the location as being an Indian-Pakistan neighbourhood (印巴地区, *Yinba diqu*) alongside assurances it was a ‘safe’ neighbourhood. The warning about Heiren diqu, therefore, did not refer to an agreed-upon space, but rather a generalised invocation of danger. The presence of Heiren racialized spatial divisions that in turn reinforced associations with danger.

My confidence in calling these ‘racialized’, is reinforced by how a Chinese-speaking interlocutor specifically asked me once not to invite Heiren into their space. Their unprompted supplement that this was not ‘racism’, (种族主义, *zhongzuzhuyi*), but based on bad experiences, reinforces the heuristic and political value to insisting on the reality of *racialisation* as a process. Nonetheless, the concept of *racialisation* still needs to be unpacked. When Chinese businesses or residences choose to segregate against Heiren in Africa, their reasoning is similar, for example, to discrimination in Chinese cities against ‘rural migrants’. The way Chinese migrants talk about Heiren and crime, for example is very similar to how Katherine Mason heard urbanites in Guangzhou talk about migrants and crime.⁶⁷ In Africa, however, these attitudes and practices become complicit with racialized practices historically practiced by Europeans and Indians. There are key similarities in *discrimination*, but the differences depend on how one understands the category of ‘race’, in both ‘etic’ and ‘emic’ terms. This is why I describe these practices primarily in terms of *complicity*.⁶⁸

Discursive complicity

As a white American interacting within a Chinese-speaking community, I have to recognise that I was also complicit in the production of racial discourse even if I did not use the word 'Heiren'. I used other terms, like 'Tanzanians' or 'locals' in conversation when necessary. Nonetheless, I usually remained silent when interlocutors articulated stereotypes about Tanzanians. When I witnessed explicitly racist speech, by which I mean Chinese-speakers shifting from Heiren to 'Heigui' (黑鬼, black devil/ghost), I also stayed silent. My rationalisation was 'research', a disciplined but still problematic performance of detachment that disavowed my coeval sociality with my interlocutors. My second reason was avoiding conflict, itself complicity in the name of social harmony.⁶⁹ In either case, my silence was problematic because it could be construed by my interlocutors as consent.

I was also complicit because sometimes when I shared stories about ordinary fieldwork challenges, interlocutors sometimes sympathetically said, 'Heiren are like this'. In response, my explanations became more elaborate, with added ethnographic contextualisation. In Pagliai's words, 'one does not need to be racist (in terms of explicit personal beliefs) to participate in doing being racist in conversation'.⁷⁰ In addition to silence, one contributes to discourses about the other without necessarily committing to a racist ideology. For example, I knew Chinese migrants who criticised other Chinese for complaining too much about Heiren, attributing the problems they faced to their own behaviour, and arguing for a need for cultural understanding. Nonetheless, on other occasions with groups of people, they would share individual stories about interactions with Tanzanians that others at the table had already framed as a discussion about Heiren.

My unintended complicity in these processes became more apparent the longer I stayed in Tanzania because, increasingly, I was learning less about Africa from the experience of Chinese migrants, and rather, was increasingly someone newcomer Chinese sought out for information. For example, several months into my fieldwork, a Chinese Masters student came to Tanzania to conduct anthropological fieldwork. The fieldwork was his first time ever travelling outside of China. I agreed to accompany him out on his first day to help familiarise him with the city and to introduce him to some of my interlocutors. This was an opportunity to uncannily (re)-experience my own arrival, and to reflect on my own complicities.

He carried a backpack, and I suggested to him that it might be better for him not to bring it. My reasoning was that the place we were going to, the wholesale market of Kariakoo, was crowded, thefts were not uncommon, and that being Chinese with a backpack in particular made him a potential target. This was based on what I often heard from Chinese interlocutors, that Chinese were perceived by potential thieves to be likely carrying large amounts of cash.

The first place I took him was a wholesale store managed by a man named Mr. Liu (psuedonym). The store was located underground and off the main street. Mr. Liu employed several Tanzanians as assistants in the store, but they were out when we arrived. Liu invited us to sit, and the student removed his backpack and placed it on the seat next to him. Liu warned him that it was not safe to carry a backpack like that around Kariakoo because, in his words, 'Heiren might steal it'. Liu said this casually. It was an unmarked and unexceptional statement for Chinese-speakers to make. People

also might use the term ‘thieves’, (小偷, *xiaotou*), which is ethnically unspecific, but the term Heiren is just as frequently used in such unmarked contexts.

Mr. Liu’s comment embarrassed me about the anxiety I felt for the student carrying his backpack. I also silently reflected on how I had verbally warned him against carrying a backpack. Although I did not use the term ‘Heiren’, my warnings undoubtedly resonated with Liu’s, and probably contributed to the fact that when Mr. Liu’s Tanzanian employees returned with a customer, also Tanzanian, and we could hear their voices coming down the stairs, the student instinctively grabbed his backpack.

‘It’s nothing (没事, *mei shi*)’, responded Mr. Liu, shaking his head.

In terms of ordinary speech, the main difference between me and Mr. Liu was the use of ‘Heiren’. Does this make me less ‘racist’ than Mr. Liu? I would argue that the question of individual attitudes and language is less relevant than observing the complementarity of warnings and the particular effects on the student, who instinctively grabbed his bag in response to the sound of approaching Tanzanians. Ironically, it fell upon Mr. Liu, the same person who indirectly explained the danger to originate from Heiren in particular, to also challenge a paranoid reaction to the appearance of actually-existing Tanzanians.

Recognising and addressing these complicities requires setting aside the concept of ‘Chinese racism’ as a discrete phenomena. Chinese and African interact in a context that is already racialized. The literature on Chinese discourses about Africans can itself be complicit in these same discourses depending on how the material is presented.

The first reason is the uncritical duplication of racist statements. Although the authors who write about racist ideology and discourse among Chinese may disavow racism, the reproduction of these utterances naturalises their content, especially if without any critical commentary.⁷¹ In being focused on the Chinese, it leaves the impression that there is a singular stereotype about Africans. The second reason is that challenging narratives of Chinese racism in Africa risks highlighting the geopolitics of anti-China discourses while marginalising the study of anti-black discourses themselves.⁷²

Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed everyday knowledge production among Chinese migrants about Africans through a close examination of a key term, Heiren (黑人, black person/people), and an ethnographic account of its usage in ordinary discourse among Chinese in Dar es Salaam. As I have demonstrated, tracing the use of Heiren helps us better understand the asymmetries of the Africa-China relationship, and how much discourses on cultural others can’t be reduced to individual attitudes and experiences, but must be considered as a collaborative discursive production.

Heiren is a versatile term that can refer to large number of referents, but its ubiquitous use in ordinary speech homogenises Africans because it provides Chinese migrants a common referent for comparing their diverse but resonant experiences with the challenge of living and working in an unfamiliar country, possessing relative economic power while lacking political power. This does not mean that Chinese migrants do not appreciate social/ethnic differences among Africans, but rather that the conventional use of Heiren nevertheless produces homogenisation.

My account provides examples of how the term Heiren is deployed in heterogeneous social situations and discursive contexts. I have focused, however, on those discursive

contexts that involve the characterisation of Heiren as a category of people with particular ascribed qualities and traits. Chinese migrants do sometimes bring a preexisting set of ideas about Heiren, but as I have argued, the orientations Chinese migrants receive from other Chinese when they come to Africa is also significant in reinforcing or shaping orientations towards Heiren within urban space. Notwithstanding the complexity of subsequent Chinese–African interactions, there are structural patterns that over-determine the manner in which Chinese and Africans tend to meet. Chinese come to Africa as investors/beneficiaries vis-à-vis locals, but also as vulnerable migrants/guests vis-à-vis the state/hosts. My account gives special attention to the association between Heiren and concerns about personal security.

These vernacular forms of knowledge production involve *racialisation* but insofar that they involve ways of categorising (thematizing) and characterising which are discursively complicit with circulating global racist discourses. Rather than describing a ‘Chinese racism’, I have tried to keep visible my presence as a white American to problematise the politics of knowledge production. The translation of Heiren, and statements about Heiren, into English as ‘blacks’, and statements about ‘blacks’, makes manifest the latent complicity of Heiren discourse.

Heiren is complicit with racialisation, but the casual application of ‘race’ and ‘racism’ to Chinese discourses about Africans often has the unintended effect of undermining critical discourse because these terms do not translate directly into Chinese usage concerning discrimination and inequality. This means these debates very quickly turn into debates about whether Chinese discourse about ‘blacks’ is or is not commensurable with familiar forms of white anti-black racism. Instead, and with the ultimate aim to contribute to the deconstruction of racial hierarchies, this paper directs attention to how race is constructed in a translingual context and raises questions about the capacity of actually existing Africa–China relations to transform them.

Notes

1. Huynh and Park (2018).
2. Lan (2017, 2).
3. The fieldwork this research is based was approved by Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Brown University (#1404001021)
4. Dikotter (1992), Sautman (1994), Huang (2017), Huang (2020).
5. Sautman and Yan (2014, 2016), Li (2016), Castillo (2016, 2020).
6. Lan (2017, 3).
7. Pierre (2013).
8. Bledsoe and Wright (2019), Wilderson III (2020).
9. Dikotter (1992).
10. Karl (2002).
11. Dikotter (1992), Harrison (1995, 57), Cheng (2019).
12. Cf. Mao Zedong’s 1963 statement “Supporting American Blacks in their Struggle Against Racism.”
13. Sautman (1994).
14. Cheng (2011, 2019), Carrico (2017), Huang (2020).
15. Hood (2011).
16. Wilderson III (2020).
17. Castillo (2020, 311).
18. Shen (2009), Cheng (2011), Zhou, Shenasi and Xu (2016), Huang (2020), Castillo (2020).

19. Lan (2017, 46).
20. Lan (2017), Huynh and Park (2018). This is especially true when heterosexual male Chinese opposition to romantic intimacies between Chinese women and African men are treated as “Chinese” attitudes without considering the perspectives of the Chinese women in question themselves (cf. Shen 2009).
21. Brown (2016, 21). But see also Liu (2013) on African experiences of racial discrimination in Mao’s China.
22. Lan (2017, 3).
23. Li (2016).
24. Cheng (2019).
25. Scott and Sijake (2016).
26. Schmitz (2014), Driessen (2019), Sheridan (2019).
27. Sheridan (2019).
28. Wu (2021).
29. Monson (2013), Huang (2017), Ke-Schutte (2019), Huynh and Park (2018), Castillo (2020).
30. Sautman and Yan (2016), Huynh and Park (2018), Castillo (2020).
31. Lan (2017, 5).
32. Sautman and Yan (2016).
33. Sautman and Yan (2016, 3).
34. Huynh and Park (2018, 163).
35. Pierre (2020).
36. Pierre (2013).
37. Hill (2008).
38. Kockelman (2007).
39. Lan (2017).
40. French (2014).
41. Pierre (2020).
42. Kockelman (2013).
43. Huynh and Park (2018, 168), Ke-Schutte (2019).
44. Huang and Lu (2018), Adebayo (2021).
45. Cheng (2011), Lan (2017).
46. Monson (2009).
47. Kockelman (2013, 151).
48. Ibid.
49. Kockelman (2007, 376).
50. Ibid.
51. Cf. Jin (2008, 28).
52. Lan (2017, 61) provides examples of jokes in China about Africans in Guangzhou which play on these double meanings.
53. Pierre (2020).
54. For some migrants, the different nationalities in Africa are merely different versions of African. I heard Chinese interlocutors sometimes use phrases like “The Black people here” (这里的黑人, *zheli de Heiren*), or “The Black people in Botswana” (博茨瓦纳的黑人, *Bociwana de Heiren*).
55. Silverstein (1976).
56. Chinese migrants rarely use Heiren as a direct address in the second person, but more often learn and adapt Swahili terminology, such as “brother (*kaka*),” “sister (*dada*),” and “friend (*rafiki*)”
57. Rounds and Huang (2017).
58. Hill (2008).
59. Lan (2017, 36).
60. Kockelman (2007).
61. “orientation, n.”. OED Online. June 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/132540?redirectedFrom=orientation> (accessed June 26, 2019).

62. Kockelman (2013).
63. Di Wu (2021) describes how such storytelling in Zambia contributes to both a sense of a Chinese community, and a pervasive “anxiety” that crosses the class lines which otherwise divide the Chinese.
64. Cf. Wu (2016).
65. Hill (2008, 93).
66. “orientation, n.”. OED Online. June 2019. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/132540?redirectedFrom=orientation> (accessed June 26, 2019).
67. Personal Communication.
68. My use of complicity is focused on the production of racial discourse, and is therefore different from Steinmuller (2013) who defines “complicity” in terms of Herzfeld’s idea of the cultural intimacy of participating in practices that are disavowed in the official (state) register, but are nonetheless practices that allow members of a community to recognise each other.
69. Pagliai (2011).
70. Pagliai (2011).
71. Fennell (2017).
72. There has been a trend in recent years by Black writers and Chinese allies to start a conversation about racism in China.

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