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Black in Beijing

How Transient Black Foreigners Create Community in China

By Myhana M. Kerr



Macalester College

Honors Project in Anthropology

Advisor: Arjun Guneratne

Spring 2018

Abstract	4
Acknowledgments	6
Chapter I: Introduction	8
Theoretical Framework	8
Situating the Ethnography	19
Early Histories of African and Chinese Interactions During Imperial Times	21
Black Bodies in The People’s Republic of China	22
China’s Relationship with Africa Today: Forum on China-Africa Cooperation	26
Literature Review	27
Importance of Understanding Youth and Hearing Black Voices	27
Is Racism Native to China?	30
Contemporary Example: Chocolate Cities	31
Methods: Crafting the Ethnography	32
Prospectus	36
Chapter II: What Brings People to Beijing?	38
Adjusting to Beijing	41
Finding Housing	43
Getting Around	46
Navigating Language Barriers and School Life	47
Home and Family	51
Adjusting to Life in China	54
Chapter III: Community Formation	56
Pre-2010	57
Post-2010	59
Comparing Applications: The Battle of the Apps	61
Using WeChat in China	62
Engaging in Digital Communities	65
Social Media For Us, by Us	67
Dynamic Actors and Changing Communities	68
In the Streets of Beijing	70
Complexities of Black Experiences	71
Unity Among Black Expatriates	73
Outside of Black Expat Circles	74
In the Long Run...	75

Chapter IV: Relations with Chinese	78
Black Bodies in Chinese Media	84
Hierarchies of Nationality, Blackness, and Language	84
Importance of Place and Space	87
Dealing with Hypervisibility and Different Manners	91
It's not just Black and White...	93
Reciprocated Cultural Exchange and Bilateral People-to-People Relationships	94
Language	97
Black People's Perceptions of the Chinese	100
Misconceptions on All Sides	103
Imagining Foreigners	105
Chapter V: So How Do They Do It?	108
And Why Does This Matter?	110
Bibliography	113

Abstract

This ethnography describes how Black people adapt to life in China and how they deal with the various meanings imposed on their bodies by Chinese society. In five chapters, I describe why Black people move to China, how they form relationships and find communities, and how Black people interact with Chinese society. In China, one's Blackness is salient because it is the defining attribute that sets people of African origin apart. Moreover, even though most Black expatriates are only in China for a temporary period, there are more Black people traveling to China overall, creating a critical mass to demonstrate counter-narratives to meanings imposed on their Black bodies by Chinese society. I explain how Black expatriates are finding ways, through joint community efforts that include Black and non-Black people alike, to not only survive in China, but to thrive as well.

Honors Project in the Anthropology Department
Arjun Guneratne
Anthropology

Acknowledgments

I never expected to learn more about living in my Black body in Beijing... but I am glad that I did because this kind of learning is an on-going process. I learned so much about the bravery and resiliency that it takes to go outside of your comfort zone and away from your friends and family to a place that you never expected to feel like home. While in Beijing, I had the pleasure of meeting people who became my friends and family. To all of you in Beijing, thank you for embracing me at this time of great personal growth and realization.

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To my beloved community everywhere, thank you.

Chapter I: Introduction

I was surprised to find Black people in China. And I didn't just find Black people who were tourists in China, but rather full-time professionals, students pursuing advanced degrees, and business owners, in addition to also wanderlust travelers. The experiences of Black expatriates in Beijing are stories about living in a country where they are immediately identified as foreigners and outsiders because of their skin color, their mother tongues, and the cultures they practice. And so I have written this ethnography about how Black people adapt to life in China and how they deal with having various meanings imposed on their bodies by Chinese society. Therefore, I argue that Black expatriates of different nationalities in China create communities that rely on skin color as a unifying factor because of the common experiences Black people face in China, even though they also occupy other communities based on factors like nationality and personal interests.

Theoretical Framework

China has a long history of influence and authority over East Asian countries, namely Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and Vietnam, as tributary states and extensions of the Chinese dynastic empire. Therefore, China, like the United States, France, and England (amongst other European and colonial powers), is a nation that is accustomed to dominating *others*. Although China has a more distant history than Western countries with enslavement of native and Black peoples, Black people moving to China are still experiencing “othering” in the form of anti-Black racism similar to their experience in

other parts of the world. Edward Said (1978) describes “othering” through the concept of Orientalism.

The Orient [...] is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience (Said 1978: 1-2).

Because this ethnography centers the lived experiences of Black expatriates, I draw a parallel between Said’s Orientalism and W. E. B. DuBois’ theory of “double consciousness”. Said’s explanation of the Orient is applicable to the “othering” that Black people face in China. In this case, the Chinese are now the dominant group that constructs imagined ways in which Black people as a collective of Africans from a singular culture are different from them as Chinese people. Where Said describes how white European powers imagine the “other” or the “Orient”, DuBois frames his “double consciousness” as not only his self-awareness as a Black man, but also understanding how he is imagined by the (white) people who see him as an “other”.

Double consciousness is this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness (Du Bois 1903: 4).

The idea of *race* today is social construct without a biological foundation, used as a tool to validate human subjugation (Zack 1997: 100). The concept of *race* is relevant in that it is often cited as a social fact from our history of colonialism and subjugation.

Race is not foundational: in different systems, race could have been constructed differently or indeed never have come into existence in the first place. Race is not essentialist: the same individuals would be differently raced in different systems. Race is not “metaphysical” in the deep sense of being eternal, unchanging, necessary, part of the basic furniture of the universe. But race is a *contingently* deep reality that structures our particular social universe, having a social objectivity and

causal significance that arise out of *our* particular history” (Mills 1998: 48).

Black people living in Beijing, China, experience a type of hypervisibility because of the color of their skin—because of their Blackness. And the ways in which they are read are based on Chinese imaginations of Black people, in this case, Black people as all coming from Africa and as being inferior to the dominant cultural group. The African-American philosopher, Charles Mills, explains that because of our world’s history of slavery and colonization, we now live in a world that “ties [the Black] phenotype to subordination” (Mills 1998: 7).

Even though China does not have the same history with enslavement and colonization that is specific to the West, Black people still face similar expressions of anti-Blackness within China’s borders. This history produces two facts: the fact that colorism is alive and well in China *and* that China is a player in the global processes that are shaped by colonialism and imperialism. As a result, *race*, even as an ambiguous social construct, does still have weight because it was a foundational tool in the construction of today’s Westernized world. Therefore, there is a need for a certain kind of consciousness to develop whereby people “view race as both real and unreal” (Mills 1998: 47). The reality of *race* as a weighted social fact is common amongst Black Americans, because Black people are in the minority of the overall population in the United States. Therefore, in the American cultural context, it is harder to dismiss race as something other than a social fact and as a result, Black Americans tend to “think about race too much” (source: Informant). Conversely, Black individuals who come from a cultural context in which Black people are the majority have identities that rely on more

than the color of their skin to define them. In a majority Black context, it is easier to refute the social significance of race because they are in the majority.

During their time in Beijing, the 22 informants I met described the various ways that they felt “othered” by some Chinese people they encountered. For example, Black people are exoticized and fetishized as they walk the streets of Beijing, being photographed without their consent. When I was photographed in Beijing, I felt like an essentialized object, not like a person. While this type of “othering” may seem harmless because it is not typically ill intentioned by the Chinese photographers, it was an uncomfortable situation for me to be in. Moreover, this form of “othering” that essentializes the Black body, while not inherently ill intended can, in fact, be more harmful because of the unrealized harm it causes to the psyche of Black people who are being photographed. My informants represent a privileged group of people who can enact their agency to speak out against instances of “othering” by their Chinese counterparts, because Black people do not rely on Chinese photographers for their livelihood. However, Black expatriates must negotiate between speaking out in a way that asserts their agency, while also being cognizant that in doing so, they may appear overly violent or too aggressive, thereby facing disciplinary reactions from Chinese law enforcement. My informants told me stories about times when Chinese police raid venues where there are majority Black and African crowds on the basis of illegal presence and drug trafficking (even though this is oftentimes not the case), which is why we decided against hosting a Black Women’s History month event on a rooftop in downtown Beijing. While the act of hosting an event that recognizes the full personhood of Black women in China is a form of expressing agency, Black expatriates must be conscious that their bodies are

seen not only as a spectacle, but also as a threat when it goes against Chinese expectations and imaginations of proper conduct.

The other kind of “othering” that my informants experienced, as I did, were the blatant anti-Black and discriminatory practices that took place in Beijing; for example, taxi drivers would drive past me and instead pick up other Chinese or white passengers instead. Or when Black English teachers are denied teaching positions because they are not white. Even in instances of renting apartments, Black foreigners are typically charged higher rates than their Chinese or white counterparts. This form of “othering”, while more evident, is not any more or less harmful than the exotification of the Black body. One question that the philosopher Frantz Fanon poses to his readers is “What does racism do to people? Racism objectifies” (Schmitt 1996: 35). This “objectification” can also be referred to as a “thingification” and is a process described as follows: “Objectification is not turning people into things— that cannot be done— but *pretending* that they are things and, more importantly, forcing them to accept that pretense, at least in relations to the oppressor” (Schmitt 1996: 39). Based on Fanon’s approach to what racism does to people, by way of this “thingification”, is that racism is expressed in the forms of denigration, distrust, ridicule, exclusion, rendering invisible, scapegoating, and violence— each of which Black people experience in Beijing (Schmitt 1996: 35).

While in Beijing, Black foreigners are experiencing their Blackness in a hyperbolic way, whether or not they recognize their Blackness as the main factor that their Chinese counterparts are reacting to. In focusing on how Black people experience a particular type of “othering” in Beijing, I draw on Fanon’s and Du Bois’ theories about Black people’s awareness of themselves, their colonized state of mind, and how non-

Black people see them. Du Bois' idea of "double consciousness" states the need for Black people to be aware of themselves *and* aware of how other people see them. This type of awareness relates to Fanon's desire for the Frenchmen he interacted with to not only see him as a Black man, but as a philosopher, as an intellectual, as a full person. Within the context of my research, many of my informants spoke of their experiences of being tokenized in Beijing and instances where the Chinese people that they interacted with frequently engaged with them on a superficial level by asking if they were from Africa or remarking on how similar a Black woman looked to Michelle Obama and likening Black men with Kobe Bryant. Fanon is frequently cited for wanting his fellow Frenchmen (or Chinese counterparts in the case of my research) to not have "the full complexity of his person to be summed up in one word... [he] wants to be seen and known for who they are, as just this person unlike any other" (Schmitt 1996: 41-42).

In response to the "othering" that they face in Beijing, my informants described the ways that Black people respond to their hypervisibility and hyper-Blackness. Some Black foreigners move to Beijing with no intention of integrating themselves into the Chinese communities in which they live and work, instead, preferring to stick to themselves and create their own culturally specific enclaves within the city. Other Black foreigners are unaware that they are being "othered" on the basis of how their Black phenotype is imagined by Chinese people.

In every society, there is a hierarchical system that dictates how individuals relate to each other in a prescribed fashion. Parekh's explanation is applicable to the surprise that Black foreigners feel when they arrive in Beijing with preconceptions about their role in Chinese society, only to encounter differences that they did not expect. All of my

informants have the financial means that allow them to travel, and the privileges associated with having passports and an education. Much of my theoretical framework examines Black people “othered” on the basis of skin color and the influence of race of as a social fact. Nevertheless, most Black foreigners are arriving in Beijing with previous understandings of the privileges associated with their positions within society. Bhiku Parekh explains that society is not simply about the people within, but rather how they relate to each other.

A society is not a collection of individuals, but a system of positions [...]. To be a member of a society is to occupy a prestructured social space and to find oneself already related to others in a certain manner [...] Since [one’s] relations with other positions are objectively structured in a determinate manner, so are [one’s] social experiences (quoted in Mills 1998: 27-28).

Part of this surprise is that Black foreigners must figure out how to navigate instances of “othering”, which is a form of anti-Black racism, because of the hypervisibility of their Blackness and assumptions based on Black people as a *collective*. In response Black foreigners have created micro-communities in an attempt to express different parts of their identity other than their Blackness. In doing so, Black expatriates also engage in a kind of reflexive “othering” when they withdraw from being in the Chinese gaze by creating specific enclaves that allow them to engage with other people on the basis of nationality, language, gender, class, personal interests, etc. Black foreigners in Beijing are looking for ways to experience their full personhood, in a way that values their intersectional identities as individuals that go beyond their simply being Black.

However, in creating these smaller enclaves, Black expatriates are at risk of only creating fragmentary relationships with others who share one or many of the same identities. Therefore, Black expatriates, as individuals, must find a balance between

creating their own identity specific enclaves and collaborating with the wider Black communities to reframe how Black bodies are imagined in China. In doing so, Black expatriates are restructuring the socio-cultural landscape of Beijing. Drawing on Appadurai's ideas about community, the imagination, and global cultural flows, I also examine how Black foreigners migrate to China and how they are disrupting the purported homogenization of the country, while they also learn more about themselves as individuals through this multifaceted exchange of different cultural narratives. To explain how this is done, I reference Appadurai's idea of *ethnoscapes* from the perspective of Black actors.

Ethnoscapes are the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree. [...] human motion as more persons and groups deal with the realities of having to move or the fantasies of wanting to move. (Appadurai 1999: 33-34).

Appadurai's idea of *ethnoscapes* elucidates that it is not enough to understand communities as existing exclusively of others, but that all of the actors have a role in deterritorializing spaces in a way that reconstructs the imagined realities of community. The presence of Black people living in China disrupts the narrative that there are only Chinese people living in China, given that there are significant African and Black populations living in Wuhan and Guangzhou, China. These enclaves of African and Black people are informally referred to as "Chocolate Cities", with the population in Guangzhou at an estimated 20,000 Black migrants (Lang 2016: 298). Appadurai states that the problem with "today's global interactions" is the tension between "cultural homogenization" and "cultural heterogenization" (Appadurai 1999: 32). Therefore, as Black expatriates move to Beijing and outside of familiar cultural context, they must

navigate the unwanted attention received in China, as they engage with the possibility of finding a fluid conceptualization and re-imagining of Blackness that is neither singular nor static by subverting Chinese norms.

In order to subvert Chinese imagined norms about Black foreigners, Black people must have what Du Bois refers to as a “double consciousness”; they must not only be aware of how they see and understand themselves, but also be aware of how others see and understand their Black bodies. The necessity of a “double consciousness” applies to Black expatriates needing to understand how their Chinese counterparts see them, and also how Black expatriates see and imagine each other, because there is no single pole or definition of Blackness. This awareness of self and the imagined self helps Black people expand their understanding of each other and of Blackness as only one of many complex identities.

As Black expatriates occupy positions within Chinese society, they have started subverting traditionally Chinese norms, like space, by hosting public events. In late March of 2018, a group of Black foreigners organized the largest gathering of Black business owners from throughout the Diaspora in recent history, to exhibit their skills, products, and presence in Beijing. This event was hosted in a *hutong*, an architectural style that is specific to traditional Chinese home layouts. People of all backgrounds in Beijing were invited to this event, called BlackExpo, to experience the plurality and diversity within Blackness. This event represents how important it is for Black people to decolonize their minds in a way that is aware of how they should be working to counter the status quo, which dictates that people who are phenotypically Black occupy subaltern status. This decolonization process of understanding how Black bodies are “othered” in

Beijing, can only be countered through bilateral intercultural exchange between all people. Black people without this awareness are at risk of remaining in the same space of oppression. Therefore, in learning more about themselves, decolonizing their minds against the anti-Black status quo, and engaging in bilateral intercultural exchange, Black expatriates are able to deterritorialize the ways in which they are “othered” in Beijing by their Chinese counterparts. This theoretical framework also acknowledges that both Black expatriates and their Chinese counterparts participate in a mutual process of “othering”. I call for both an individual and collective consciousness to counter the status quo of being uncomfortable with and prejudice towards the unfamiliar “other”.

To generalize, there are two distinct groups of Black people coming to Beijing: Africans, and Black people from non-African countries (e.g. Black Americans, Black Europeans, South Americans). I consider Black people from non-African countries as members of the African Diaspora. Both groups arrive in China for reasons that go beyond quotidian push-pull migration theory. I explore how the concept of ‘affective circuits’ by Jennifer Cole and Christian Groes (2016) applies to Black people migrating from various countries to Beijing.

We focus especially on the myriad exchanges of goods, people, ideas, and money through which migrants navigate their social relationships, drawing particular attention to the deeply held sentiments that ride alongside and become a part of these exchanges. We also tend to the ways various actors, including migrants, state officials, and kin seek to facilitate, block, or otherwise control mobility through the resulting social networks. We also attend to the social formations that emerge from sending, withholding, and receiving goods, ideas, bodies, and emotions [as] *affective circuits*. (Cole and Groes 2016: 2)

This perspective is absent in the current literature on Sino-African relations, which primarily discusses the economic aspects of China’s role in Africa. Through the lens of

affective migration circuits, I explain some of the nuanced emotional and personal reasons for why Black actors migrate to this East Asian city.

The lived experiences of Black people in China is shaped by positive and negative interactions with, and treatment by, their Chinese counterparts. These negative life experiences of Black expatriates do not align with the Chinese government's statements regarding the elimination of racial discrimination nor the mission of the Forum on China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (United Nations 2017: 1-24). Moreover, Chinese people are not necessarily distinguishing Africans from people of other nations with darker skin; all Black bodies in China are subjected to, or are at risk of being, viewed and treated negatively (Mathews 2017: 55).

My discussion of Black community formation is shaped by three terms coined by Arjun Appadurai (1996) again, to “propose [...] an elementary framework for exploring such disjunctures” within the processes of global cultural flows: *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, and *technoscapes* (33). The decision to use the suffix -scape speaks to the amorphous and dynamic nature of global cultural flows. I want to draw particular attention to Appadurai's idea of *technoscapes*. This idea refers to “the global configuration, also ever fluid, of technology and the fact that technology, both high and low, both mechanical and informational, now moves at high speeds across various kinds of previously impervious boundaries” (Appadurai 1996: 34). *Technoscapes* interact with all of the other -scapes with having the most relevance in regards to community formation among Black expatriates in China. *Mediascapes* are described as “image-centered, narrative based accounts of strips of reality” that contribute to the individual's “imagined lives [...] their own as well as those of other living in other places” (Appadurai

1996: 35). Functionally, Appadurai's term *mediascapes* is also explained in reference to the production and dissemination of information.

Mediascapes refer to both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film-production studios), which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media (Appadurai 1996: 35). The theoretical concepts that I draw on helped me understand that Black expatriates' experiences in Beijing are not solely isolated incidences, but rather the outcome of intertwined global processes with dynamic actors that shape how people are related to one another.

Situating the Ethnography

After a year of collecting and analyzing data, I have a more solidified understanding of how China's socio-historical contexts imposed varied interpretations of my body from a Chinese perspective. Unfortunately, much of the literature I encountered regarding interactions between Black people and China, was produced by Western scholars, specifically white men, who focused on the economic relationships between China and African countries. Therefore, I have to constantly be aware of my Western positionality and culturally specific understanding of race and racial biases as I am familiar with them. I am also particularly mindful of how the actions of a single individual can wrongly be used to represent an entire group or nation. In my position as a young, Black, undergraduate student, I intend for my work to contribute to the discourse of migration, race, racism, and anti-Blackness in China. But more importantly, I aim to do so from a place that is aware of my positionality and takes Chinese perspectives into

consideration. Racism and prejudice against Black bodies is alive and well throughout the world— China is no exception to this. Therefore I am not debating whether or not there is racism in China; there is. Rather, I intend to elucidate how Black foreigners cope with and navigate Chinese society, as Chinese actors impose meanings upon their bodies. Subsequently, I will also explain what brings foreigners to Beijing and how they form communities with those around them.

In addition to foregrounding my positionality, I rely on 22 informants to provide ethnographic detail about Black expatriates' lives in China. While my research is lacking in Chinese informants, I chose to prioritize Blackness and Black people's stories in hopes of better understanding what I was experiencing while in Beijing. I aim to contribute to the visible literature about Black experiences abroad, specifically in China. Furthermore, I chose to illuminate stories that I had not been personally exposed to previously. I asked Black people to tell their stories in their own way by asking general, open-ended questions to understand how they got to Beijing, what they do in the city, and so on.

Through my research, I seek to understand why Black expatriates move to Beijing and the difficulties and successes they face as they adapt to life in a country where they cannot blend in. My 22 informants helped me understand how different people adjust, or not, to unfamiliar situations and cultural contexts. The scholarship on Black expatriates in China is hardly keeping pace with the changing day-to-day lives of Black people and their Chinese counterparts in cities like Beijing. I intend for my work to draw awareness to Black people's lives in China today as told through the eyes of a Black, female scholar.

Early Histories of African and Chinese Interactions During Imperial Times

Within the context of premodern Chinese society, *black people* and *blackness* “encompassed several groups of people with dark skins: the non-Han Chinese, South Asians, and black African slaves brought to Guangzhou by Arab traders” (Lan 2016: 302). Early interactions between Africans and Chinese occurred within the belief systems of traditional Chinese mythology and social hierarchy within Chinese society. African slaves were imported into China as early as the Tang Dynasty (618 AD-907 AD) (Dikötter 2015: 11). Later on, between 1405 and 1433, the Chinese admiral Zheng He¹ completed several voyages that took him into the Indian Ocean as far as Africa (Lan 2016: 302). In 1418, Zheng He’s great ‘Star Raft’ (in reference to his flotilla) is said to have sailed from China to East Africa to begin a rather prosperous overseas trading relationship with African city-states (Snow 1998: 691). Zheng He’s flotilla may have even rounded Africa’s southern tip (Snow 1998: 691). Unfortunately, Chinese civil-service bureaucrats were frightened of Mongol invaders at the northern border and after his last voyage, for the next 400 years, China closed its doors to all external trade in order to concentrate all efforts on defending against the Mongol threat (Snow 1998: 691).

But what is the history of racial discourse in China? Furthermore, how does the historicity of ‘race’ in China relate to the Black bodies that I reference in this ethnography? As I read about the introduction of African slaves into Chinese society, I found it difficult to distinguish if the Chinese identify differences more on the basis of skin color or nationality. But I did find the following documents and statements from Chinese officials in the later dynastic period. During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), a

¹ Zheng He was a notable Chinese maritime explorer, diplomat, court eunuch, and admiral during the Ming Dynasty.

Chinese court official named Yi Nai in 1898 “actively advocated racial fusion (合种/*hé zhǒng*) [through interracial marriage] as a means of strengthening the Qing” Dynasty, which was ultimately the last dynasty of China (Dikötter 2015: 54). However, interracial marriages were only preferred between white people (namely Europeans) and Chinese because marriage between Africans and Chinese was considered to be repulsive by other Chinese officials.

The appearance of Africans ‘with their iron faces, silver teeth, slanting jaws like a pig, front view like an ox, full breasts, unkempt hair, their hands and feet dark black, stupid (*chun*) like sheep or swine’, was simply too frightening. No refined white woman would ever agree to mate with a ‘monstrously ugly black’. (Dikötter 2015: 56)

The phrase “white woman” refers to European women and by extension, pale-skinned Chinese women, since the Chinese believed that their race was equally competent with the Europeans race. Moreover, African identity, specifically the African male identity, is being constructed as savage and undesirable to individuals within Chinese society during the Qing Dynasty.

Black Bodies in The People’s Republic of China

Upon the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Chinese officials believed that China’s vast population would always come out on top. Whereas Europeans believed that they were superior to Black people, the Chinese believed that they were superior to all non-Chinese peoples, including Europeans and Africans. However, while both Europeans and Chinese believed themselves to be the superior peoples, elite Chinese scholars in the early 20th century were able to recognize the parallels between the treatment of Black people and of Chinese immigrants in the United States (Lan 2016: 303). The translation of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, retitled in Chinese

as *A Black Slave's Cry to the Heaven* published by Lin Shu in 1901, complicated the way that people in mainland China thought about Black Americans. During his tour of the United States in 1903, the Chinese scholar Liang Qichao “accepted what he learned in the US about the *despicable* behavior of *blacks* as true, [but] he still could not accept the dehumanization of black people by brutal punishments such as lynching” (Lan 2016: 303). The rationalization of Liang’s sympathy for Black Americans fits into anthropologist Charles Stafford’s preference of more accurate portrayals of Chinese feelings about Black people. Furthermore, this example contrasts with Dikötter’s ideas about the hierarchical relationship between Chinese and Africans.

According to Dikötter, both Chinese and Europeans shared the belief that Africans were at the bottom of the racial hierarchy even if they took different routes to these beliefs. In the historical context of 1915-1949, Europeans believed that Africans shared an undeniable link to apes, whereas the Chinese, since ancient times, believed that “blackness was the mark of the slave, a belief that could still be found at university level in the 1920s” (Dikötter 2015: 93).

As the Communist Party rose to power, racial theories were made taboo and anthropology as a field of study was halted because it was considered too bourgeois a discipline (Dikötter 2015: 123). This was done to do away with racial discrimination, because in order for China to develop, every individual Chinese body, regardless of ethnicity, needed to be galvanized as a part of Mao’s Third World Alliance during the 1950s (Lan 2016: 299). However, as Dikötter wrote, the academic study and social construction of “‘race’ was too resilient a notion to be simply abolished by decree” (Dikötter 2015: 124). Furthermore, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) failed at

combating Han chauvinism in an effort to promote equality between all ethnicities of China. The CCP's attempt was unsuccessful partly due to the popular belief that all Chinese minorities originated from the Han. As the largest ethnic group in China, the Han is the most prominently visible ethnicity.

The CCP's attempt at creating racial equality, notwithstanding the widespread notion in Chinese society continued to adhere to the belief that "placed [China] itself on the top of a global racial hierarchy, leading the 'colored peoples' on the bottom towards liberation" (Dikötter 2015: 126). In Communist propaganda during Chairman Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976, the posters feature Black people, presumably Africans, among the ranks of their Chinese counterparts. These posters typically feature a Chinese man as the focal point, either located in the top and/or middle of the poster, with a Black person and other (possibly) Arab people under the Chinese figures (both men and women), as seen in figure 1 (N.a. 1971). These series of posters were meant to propagate Mao's Third World Alliance aimed at uniting all non-white peoples to rise against Euro-American Capitalism.



Figure 1: "Workers of the World, Unite!" Unknown Chinese artist. Poster. (1971) (http://library.artstor.org/asset/SS7730819_7730819_10568820).

Like the chauvinism shown towards non-Chinese, the purported sense of homogeneity in Chinese society manifests itself in such a way that the dominance of the Han ethnicity in the form of Han chauvinism seeks to minimize and assimilate other minority groups through Sinocentrism. While the dominant image of China is that of the Han Chinese, there are in fact, at least 56 ethnic minorities recognized by the Chinese government (CIA 2018). There is an ancient Chinese myth that all Chinese people are descendants of one *Yellow Emperor*, which also contributes to China's obsession with the past and the strong kinship ties associated with the cultural and national identity of being Chinese (Park 2008: 70-71). As a result, in China, a person's appearance is directly linked to that individual's nationality. Moreover, China's increased presence on the African continent contributes to how Chinese and African people interact as they move between these regions.

Therefore it is necessary to understand the historical background of China-Africa relations, in order to grasp how traditional perceptions of race and status in Chinese society are acted out today. Furthermore, images of Black people that reach China from popular media range from African-American stereotypes of gangsters and athletes to African stereotypes of unnamed, poor, black and hungry children. Because media and popular culture shape the way Chinese people perceive Black people, for many Chinese the portrayal of Black people as the aforementioned athletes and rappers or poor and hungry, is considered to hold a level of truth. Given that anti-blackness is a global occurrence, my informants told stories of negative interactions with the native Chinese population.

Interactions between Black foreigners and their Chinese counterparts are based on perceptions of imagined hierarchies and stereotypes. But overall, Chinese people's perceptions of Black foreigners are tainted with prejudice due to ignorance and the inherent racism ingrained in societies around the world. However, there are agents of change on both sides of this relationship that are working to reshape and bridge gaps in the understanding of the "other".

China's Relationship with Africa Today: Forum on China-Africa Cooperation

The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) began in October of 2000, marking China's return to Africa and the re-opening of bilateral trade between China and African countries (Lan 2016: 304). Since 2009, China has been the African continent's largest trading partner (Lan 2016: 304 and Songwe et al. 2010: 3). Nearly 55 African countries participate in the Forum with delegates from China. If China is able to develop a productive relationship with African countries, then China may be able to benefit from the fertile market potential and business opportunities located on the continent (Lan 2016: 305). FOCAC is self-described as a relationship based on the values of "Sincerity, Friendship, Equality, Mutual Benefit, Unity, Cooperation and Common Development" between China and African countries (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation 2016). Economists, historians, Africanists, and Sinologists who disagree with this feel that China's presence in Africa is simply another iteration of colonization rather than an equitable relationship as described by FOCAC (Alden 2007). My research speaks to the discrepancy between FOCAC's intended values of "Sincerity, Friendship, Equality, Mutual Benefit, Unity, Cooperation and Common Development" and the lived experiences of Black expatriates (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation 2016). This is

specific case study pertaining to Sino-African relations that demonstrate contradictions in China's approach towards Black bodies because, as previously mentioned, Black bodies in China are commonly seen as African.

Literature Review

The main debate in the literature is about whether or not racism is native to Chinese culture and society. In another vein, the literature about China in terms of interactions with Black bodies frames the discussion around the economic relationships between China and African countries, without much account for the on-the-ground, everyday interactions between the Chinese and their Black counterparts.

Importance of Understanding Youth and Hearing Black Voices

A recent contribution to the scholarly discussion about Africans in China is the anthropologist Gordon Mathews' ethnography, *The World in Guangzhou: African and Other Foreigners in South China's Global Marketplace* (2017). Yet, like much of the current literature, *The World in Guangzhou* is not written by someone who identifies as Black, much less African. This lack of Black scholarly voices motivated me to pursue my own research project about how Black bodies are treated and (mis)understood. In contrast, Johnson's work remedies this and does not hold back— he speaks candidly and honestly about his experiences as an African-American in China and without the scholarly hubbub and overly complicated nuance, while also having an understanding of Chinese culture that Stafford calls for of Dikötter's work to understanding discourses of race in China. Furthermore, I also draw on Gillespie and Mathews' scholarship because

both discuss the stories of young Africans and their lives in China as students and as individuals transitioning into budding professionals, which is an aspect of my own research.

M. Dujon Johnson is not an anthropologist, but a Sinologist and lawyer. He is also a recognized name in the discourse of race in China. Johnson's book, *Race and Racism in Chinas: Chinese Racial Attitudes Towards Africans and African-Americans* (2007), provides an African-American voice that fills the void of Black scholars discussing the realities of racism in China. Johnson first experiences China as a student and then as one of the first African-Americans to receive a Ph.D. from a top Chinese university (Brown 2016). Although the book is banned in China (as it contradicts the Chinese government's statements opposing and condemning "all forms of racism"²), and is based on a Western understanding of race, Johnson is very much aware of his own positionality. Therefore, he explains the reality of racism in China through not only personal accounts but also through historical accounts of interactions between the Chinese government, Chinese people, and Black foreigners. Furthermore, Johnson has access to spaces that neither Mathews nor Chinese anthropologists have: access to the daily life of a Black man, as understood by a Black man.³

Johnson's work is in conversation with the work of Sandra Gillespie (2001) who provides 133 survey records and statistical data about African students' experiences studying in China. Gillespie's book entitled, *South-South Transfer: A Study of Sino-African Exchanges*, is based on her dissertation research. The students surveyed by

² (United Nations 2017)

³ According to Mathews, Chinese-presenting anthropologists are seen as government spies or journalists "seeking to denigrate Africans" (Mathews 2017: 25).

Gillespie were from 29 African countries, with an additional 12 participants from six other countries. While the historical overview provided is sparse and has also been criticized for a lack of proper background for the study, Gillespie's work still provides valuable insight into African students' lives studying in Chinese universities (Lin 2004: 96).

Gillespie's research brings to light the isolation and alienation that African students were and even still are subject to at the hands of their Chinese counterparts as a result of anti-African sentiments in Chinese universities during the 1960s and 1970s, due to a lack of cultural competence (Yinghong 2011, Sautman 1994). Furthermore, Gillespie's book contextualizes the interplay between Han chauvinism, popular media, and Chinese legislative policies to provide context to readers unfamiliar with China. This book focuses on the narratives of African students and, as a result, lacks a representation of Chinese perspectives. However, I understand Gillespie's text as a gateway to more conversations about the ever-increasing, ever-complex, and ever-nuanced relationships between China and Africa, not only in terms of nation-nation relations, but at ground level people-to-people relations. Gillespie's research is the closest text I have encountered which is similar to my own, with the exception of Mathews, who focuses on foreign entrepreneurs. While I have fewer participants than Gillespie, my research was able to garner a larger variety of Black experiences from Africans, African-Americans, and Afro-Europeans in varying professions and life paths, as opposed to solely African students. That being said, Gillespie's and Mathews' findings reflect many of the same sentiments of cultural isolation and dislocation experienced by Black foreigners in China that I also found in my own research. Therefore, I lean on Gillespie's work because of its

similarity to my own and as a way to demonstrate that my research aligns with previous scholarship, additionally enabling me to increase the current literature on a topic that is seldom discussed.

Is Racism Native to China?

Commonly cited in regards to the discussion of race in China is the book of the Dutch historian, Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (2015). From the perspective of a Westerner, Dikötter provides historical background on the concept of race in China as it was “first” introduced at the end of the nineteenth century. Broken into several sections investigating race as culture, type, lineage, nation, species, seed, and nationality, this book provides readers with a systematic analysis of how the notion and discourse of race has changed over time within China. As previously mentioned, Dikötter presents cases to illustrate how and why ideas about ‘race’ became so prolific throughout China and how the influence of Western racial “science” was applied and adapted to Chinese society. However, Dikötter’s work is frequently criticized “for its reductionist approach to race and its Western-centric interpretation of Chinese cultural constructs” (Lan 2016: 300). Other scholars, namely the anthropologist Charles Stafford and the historian Arif Dirlik, offer alternative approaches. Stafford (1993) calls for an understanding of Chinese concepts “on their own terms,” while Dirlik (1993) urges critical reflections on the “‘hegemonic power’ of Euro-American imperialism in spreading the discourse of race globally” (Lan 2016: 300).

I consider Dikötter’s historical overview of racial in discourse in China a helpful starting point, primarily because there is very little scholarship on ‘race’ in China. However, I also agree with Stafford’s criticism of Dikötter because, as a Western scholar

myself, I recognize that my positionality and culturally specific understanding of race as an African-American should not be misapplied to a different cultural context. In my own research, my informants have described their experiences of Chinese cab drivers asking them if they were athletes or rappers or some kind of gangsters because these are the images of Black bodies that have transcended geographical boundaries of the West and entered China. Therefore, based on my own research and experiences, I would refer to these “hegemonic powers” instead as the influences of mass media and popular culture. It is impossible to ignore Western cultural influences on China, especially in regards to the discourse of race.

Contemporary Example: Chocolate Cities

The 22 stories I collected while in Beijing are symbolic of larger grand-narratives about the lives of Black people in China. Large concentrations of African migrants living in the cities of Wuhan and Guangzhou, China, are informally referred to as “Chocolate Cities”. There are an estimated 20,000 Africans living in Guangzhou (Lan 2016: 298). Gordon Mathews’ book, *The World in Guangzhou* (2017) is the latest ethnography detailing the daily interactions between African migrants in Guangzhou and their Chinese counterparts. Mathews examines informal interactions between foreign traders and the native Chinese populations in the southern metropolis of Guangzhou, which has become a center for ‘low-end globalization’⁴. Both Chinese and African participants were involved in the creation of the text and are represented within Mathews’ narrative. *The*

⁴ Definition of “low-end globalization” (also called “globalization from below”): “the transnational flow of people and goods involving relatively small amounts of capital and informal, sometimes semi-legal or illegal transactions, often associated with ‘the developing world’ but in fact apparent across the globe” (Mathews 2017: 81).

World in Guangzhou aims to accurately portray “low-end globalization in Guangzhou and of African-Chinese and foreign-Chinese relations in China’s most multicultural city” (Mathews 2017: 27). But why Guangzhou? Recently “Guangzhou, a mega-city in South China, has become a Promised Land for many African migrants seeking wealth and fortune in the global economy” (Lang 2016: 298). Africans traveling to China reinforce the importance of also studying migration between countries in the Global South, as opposed to migration from the Global South to the Global North.

Methods: Crafting the Ethnography

One of my favorite and most inspiring quotes is by the late Zora Neale Hurston who wrote, "Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose." I couldn't agree more, primarily because that is exactly how this ethnography came to be. The idea for this research project developed during the third year of my undergraduate studies. I was nervous about studying abroad in a place with such a homogenous population that I had no way of blending into. And I thought to myself that there was no way that I could be the “only” anything in a country of more than a billion people— I was right. I met a diverse and vibrant community of Black expatriates from throughout the Diaspora, studying, living, and working in Beijing. The more I explored Beijing and engaged with its communities, the wider and more expansive the city became. Prior to my arrival, I was connected with a friend of a friend living in Shanghai. It was through this connection that I gained knowledge about the varied Black expatriate communities in China and that I could access them digitally through a Chinese app called WeChat. Through this platform, I was added to various Black and African WeChat groups

operating in China. My early view of the app WeChat and this particular affinity group gave me a glimpse of what was to come.

When I finally arrived in Beijing in January of 2017, I had made arrangements to stay with a different friend of a friend, referred to in later chapters as “Ms. Bougie Beijing”— Ms. BB for short— because that is how she described the neighborhood she lived in. Ms. BB is from an island in the Caribbean and our first communications took place over WeChat. Through WeChat, Ms. BB and I coordinated that I would be staying at her place for the two days before my program started. Once I arrived, I was able to interview her and another friend of hers, Daniel from Senegal. By the time I started my program, I already had two interviews under my belt. Ms. BB also invited me to even more WeChat groups— the Black communities in Beijing were growing before my eyes, and through WeChat, I was gaining access to them. From January to April of 2017, I spent the majority of my time in Beijing, China, at one of the national universities. During this time, I collected 22 oral interviews of Black expatriates who ranged from students to working professionals. I received oral consent from each of my participants.

For the twenty or so interviews that followed, I utilized the snowball sampling method in conjunction with asking for volunteers from WeChat users in related diasporic groups. Many of my participants told me that in Beijing, once you meet one Black person, you’ve met them all— thanks to the ease and connectivity of WeChat. The interviews were semi-structured, each beginning with individuals recounting the how and why of their arrival and presence in Beijing. After that, each story details different accounts and experiences of their time in China and specifically in Beijing (when applicable). While each story was unique, there were certainly similarities in terms of

how these Black bodies navigated space in China as I will explain. During the interviews, I recorded notes to detail specific points and big ideas as the participants spoke. As requested by some of my informants, copies of these notes were sent to them after their interviews. I also worked with my advisor Arjun Guneratne to ensure informant confidentiality.

Each informant has been given a pseudonym in order to protect their identities. These pseudonyms are used in the transcriptions and throughout my research to ensure their anonymity. Due to my location on a university campus, the majority of my participants were students. In order to get a better view of Black expatriate experiences, I sought out individuals who had lived in Beijing or other parts of China for more than five years; I identify these individuals as mid to long-term participants. Of the 22 informants, five were students pursuing either bachelor or graduate degrees, four were English teachers, and the remainder were in other professional fields ranging from consulting to foreign service to small-business entrepreneurs. At the time that their interviews were completed, seven had lived in China for less than a year, four had been in China for more than one year and fewer than five years, three lived in China for between six and ten years, and only one of my informants had lived in China for more than eleven years. Furthermore, the majority of my informants were female (18 out of 22) and from the United States (10 out of 22). Each informant self-identified as Black, and although not all of them identified as African, I still find their stories valuable because the average Chinese person does not distinguish between Black people from Africa and Black people from other parts of the world. I also had the opportunity to speak with people from all ends of the African diaspora: Europe, Canada, South America, the Caribbean, and various

African countries. My informants were from the United States, the Caribbean, Ghana, Nigeria, Europe, Lesotho, and South America.

Secondly, I practiced participant observation which included sitting in on WeChat group meetings, attending events, and simply hanging out with different Black people in Beijing. I spent time with the African Student Association at a university and attended a few of their events; I helped plan and host a Black History Month show, joined a local group (BLK GEN) to help with the promotion of positive images of Black people within China, and met with a variety of Black business owners and entrepreneurs within the city. During these outings, I made sure to take extensive notes and was even able to have follow-up conversations with people who attended those events. I audio recorded my own reflections and musings to help fill in the inevitable gaps of memory. Furthermore, keeping the posters and other publicity with the event outlines have proven to be helpful in jogging my memory regarding the events I attended while in Beijing. WeChat also gave me access to events happening outside of Beijing, thereby connecting me to events hosted by or intended for Black diasporic audiences. I was able to participate in these events and spaces with minimal distraction due to my positionality as a Black American, female student in China, which drew me closer to other informants who also identified as any single or joint combination of Black American, female, and student. The six out of ten Americans that I met were people who had recently arrived in Beijing, meaning that they had only been there for less than one year.

While participating in these various social scenes, I also recognized my own positionality as a Black American, female, college student, enabling me to include my own experiences as data for my research. In this way, I practice reflexive ethnography by

acknowledging that I am also a member of the community I am researching. While in Beijing, I lived on a university campus which brought me closer to students. Therefore, perhaps unsurprisingly, nearly half of my informants were at one time or another in China for educational purposes ranging from study abroad to completing further graduate degrees from Chinese universities and completing internships within China as well. At the time of interviewing, five of my informants were current students enrolled in graduate-level degree programs, primarily in the fields of International Trade and Business Administration.

Prospectus

Throughout this ethnography I recount the narratives of Black expatriates living in Beijing, China: how they adapt to life in China and how they deal with having various meanings imposed on their bodies by Chinese society. To do so, I explain how Black foreigners cope with and navigate through feelings of cultural isolation and dislocation that they experience in China. To contextualize how this is done, the second chapter explains what brings foreigners to Beijing, specifically Black foreigners, in addition to some of the questions and challenges that Black expatriates face once they make the decision to move to Beijing. More specifically, I will explain how foreigners find places to live, strive to succeed in Chinese universities, and keep in touch with their families and friends back home as they try to adapt to their new lives.

Once Black expatriates have moved to Beijing, most begin to seek relationships with some kind of community. The third chapter explains how Black expatriates formed communities pre-2010 and post-2010 and how changing technologies or *technoscapes* and *mediascapes* enable disparate Black people in China and around the world to create

groups based on interest and utility. Social media and the internet have enabled people to make contact and stay in contact regardless of their geographic proximity. I have identified WeChat as one of the primary ways that Black expats are able to communicate with each other once in China, as well as with other foreigners and the wider Chinese community.

While some Black expatriates create solitary lives for themselves in China, others create communities that include relationships with Chinese people. Furthermore, regardless of Black people's comfortability with the local Chinese population, they still have to navigate life in China's cities. The fourth chapter will focus on the day-to-day interactions between Black expatriates and their native Chinese counterparts and how the Chinese conceptualize a hierarchy of bodies on the basis of nationality and language in order to understand how the bodies of Black and white foreigners are imagined and perceived within Chinese society.

In the first four chapters, I discuss the how's and why's of Black expatriates lives in China, the communities they are (and are not) a part of, and how they engage with other foreigners and their Chinese counterparts. By the end of this ethnography in the fifth chapter, I explain how the interplay of Black people adapting to life in China while simultaneously dealing with meanings imposed on their bodies by Chinese society intersects with both economic politics and personal reasons. So how do they do it?

Chapter II: What Brings People to Beijing?

Why East Asia? Why China? What brings people, specifically Black people, to Beijing? These are the first three questions I asked myself and later my informants. Their responses ranged from work and educational opportunities to interests in Asian culture and pure curiosity; each informant's rationale was framed not only by push factors from their home country and pull factors from China, but by *affective circuits* as well, resulting in their transplantation to the city of Beijing in particular. The Black Americans I interviewed felt "pushed" from the United States because of the racial and systematic inequalities that pervade American society on the basis of white supremacy. Students felt "pushed" to pursue alternative educational possibilities abroad due to a lack of sufficient resources in their home countries. Even full-time professionals found themselves "pushed" into different industries in China when the job markets back home insufficiently needs for their livelihood. The previously mentioned concept of *affective circuits* examines how "the social networks that emerge from the exchange of goods, ideas, people and emotions" influence how Black expatriates do (and do not) adapt to life in Beijing (Cole and Groes 2016: 6). In this chapter I will explain what brings foreigners to Beijing, specifically Black foreigners, in addition to some of the questions and challenges that Black expatriates face once they make the decision to move to Beijing. More specifically, I will explain how foreigners find places to live, strive to succeed in Chinese universities, and keep in touch with their families and friends back home as they try to adapt to their new lives.

Stacy, an African-American woman from the southeastern United States, first came to Beijing to complete a semester abroad. After a couple of years, Stacy found

herself back in Beijing as a full-time resident working in a university to recruit international students. During our conversations, Stacy felt that there's "no baggage from the US" and Black foreigners overall can exist in a pleasant liminal space by "not facing Chinese problems." It's not their problem because they're not Chinese, and, while abroad, Black Americans don't have to deal with US problems either, and even benefit from having American passports while living in China. In regards to student experiences, Jackie arrived in Beijing from the Caribbean seeking more relevant educational experiences than what were available in her home country. While in China, she was a full-time Masters student directly enrolled in Chinese university. Similarly, Mary, who was raised in southern Africa, was attracted to the affordable and specialized educational opportunities available at Beijing's universities, some of the top institutions in the country. Analogously, full-time professionals are pushed from their home countries due to a lack of employment options and have started looking to Asia, China in particular, as new sources of economic and professional development opportunities.

As for the pull factors, China encourages students, professionals and curious travelers alike by offering scholarships and encouraging highly qualified individuals to contribute to the country's growing economies and industries. Foreign students are able to apply for either X1 or X2 visas depending on the duration of their stay in China. Professionals are eligible for business-type F/M, talent-type R, or work-type Z visas depending on their situation (Travel Guide China n.d.).

Working professionals like Leo and Debby are in China to complete work assignments. Leo, who is from the United States, first arrived in Wuhan, China, for a semester abroad, but ended up transferring to a Chinese university to complete his

undergraduate degree in broadcast journalism and media studies in 2007. Attracted to martial arts and Chinese culture, Leo chose China as his study abroad destination.

Debby's origins, on the other hand, are in a smaller country that has only recently established a presence in Beijing. Currently completing a third posting and her fourth year on assignment in Beijing, Debby works as a liaison between her home country and China in her country's foreign service. Given the dynamic nature of her job, Beijing will not be her last stop as Debby will surely be assigned to a new post in due time.

While in China for full-time work, foreigners like Leo and Debby can also expand their professional networks and maybe even change occupations during their time abroad. The same applies to students in search of internships with Chinese companies. These internships are typically a component of their educational programs as in the cases of Marsha and Daisy, who arrived from European and African countries, respectively, to pursue MBAs at a Chinese university. Marsha's decision to go to Beijing was prompted by visiting a family member who was on a work assignment in the city and after Marsha's job at home was made redundant. Accepted into an MBA program at one of China's most prestigious universities, Marsha is currently finishing her first year which included time in the classroom and an internship with networking opportunities with Chinese companies. Similarly, Daisy, from a country in southern Africa, was accepted into the same MBA program after receiving news that she had just been promoted at her company— she made the tough choice to leave and seized the chance to study in China. Students from around the world come to China funded by scholarships from either their home governments or the Chinese government.

One of the simplest reasons I encountered for why Black expatriates chose to move to China was curiosity and the love of traveling, as exemplified by Kevin and Tina. They are both Black Americans who have spent one year in China teaching English and five years (on and off) as an administrator in an international school, respectively. Often times, an individual's love of traveling is enough for them to "get up and go"— even without having every detail worked out beforehand. Tina's sentiments exemplify such an individual.

But I had no clue about anything. I was just going. I didn't care what I was doing, I just needed to leave. That was stronger than any fear that I have. And I've always had the travel bug, [...] and like I said, you get it honest. I get it honest from my parents [...].

Even so, the majority of Black expatriates in Beijing plan to leave once they have received their degrees, finished their internship or work contracts, when they've finally become homesick enough, or because of their restlessness to travel to another part of the world. Very few choose to create long-term lives for themselves in China. Nevertheless, Black expatriates who do choose to make Beijing a place of long-term residence have created homes, community networks, and strategies for living in Chinese society.

Adjusting to Beijing

Before I had even deplaned in Beijing, I had already established a few networks to help me get settled. As an American student participating in a program pre-approved by my school, I was connected with the staff members at the host institution in Beijing through my home institution's study abroad center. Furthermore, I knew fellow classmates who had already participated in the same program who could offer advice. I made other connections through friends of friends. To my surprise I already knew two

different people with connections in China. These connections helped me engage with the various social groups in Beijing by using digital resources. These digital communities extend beyond the geographic boundaries of Beijing, as the members can remain active even once they are no longer based in the city.

Social media and the internet have enabled people to make contact and stay in contact regardless of their geographic proximity. Facebook, Instagram, WeChat, and social media platforms have played a major role in connecting people across the globe—and more specifically, Black people with other Black people who are currently or have previously lived in China. WeChat allows its users to communicate through text messages, voice messages/calls, and video calls. I quickly discovered that WeChat was the key to unlocking various communities of not only other “melanated” people, but also others with an interest in anything from chess, to finding apartments, and even for sharing music and news. Moreover, some Black expatriates recommended travel blogs focused on providing Black travelers guides and advice, namely Travel Noire⁵ and Black and Abroad⁶, as a useful starting point to prepare for life abroad. These digital communities create support and advice networks for newcomers arriving in China.

Without creating and calling their newly established social networks, most newcomers to China will face difficulties as they adjust to their new lives. When students first arrive, they can find support from other students, their advisors, or other staff members attached to their institutions. For professionals, their work community serves as their initial touch points for integration into Chinese society.

⁵ <https://travelnoire.com/about/>

⁶ <https://www.weareblackandabroad.com/aboutus/>

Finding Housing

Finding housing in an unfamiliar place, especially in a major city, is a task that requires a multitude of resources. For foreigners moving to Beijing, the best place to start is to engage social networks by asking people around you, like coworkers or other foreigners who already have experience living in the city. If incoming foreigners are lucky enough to have contracts that include housing accommodations, then their work or school will arrange housing. For me, living in Beijing was simple compared to others because I was in a program that provided housing options either on-campus or in the form of a homestay with a local Chinese family. Other Black international students that I met in Beijing either lived on-campus or had found their own off-campus living arrangements after having already lived on campus for a couple of semesters. Having access to an educational institution can make finding housing and food accommodations easy and convenient if centralized on a campus. If housing is not pre-arranged, then alternative measures are taken.

One option is to live with a connection like a friend, or even a friend of a friend, if the new person already has contacts in Beijing. Another option is to use a service like Airbnb, which allows anyone looking for accommodations to connect with hosts, set their price range and duration of stay, to find a place that meets their needs (Airbnb, Inc n.d.). When Victoria returned on her third visit to Beijing from the United States to start her new position as an Operations Coordinator for a foreign policy think tank organization, she used Airbnb to find a room during her first few weeks in the city. In this way, Victoria was able to buy herself a bit more time to find long-term housing. She reached out to coworkers who were her first points of contact in Beijing. These coworkers

referred her to agents and even added her to WeChat groups focused on housing and subleasing, and even more specifically, housing and subleasing among other expatriates and foreigners. This third group composed primarily of other expatriates and foreigners proved to be particularly helpful because of the transitory nature of expats coming and going—there's an abundance of available space and someone always knows somebody else who's moving out. Foreigners may also find websites like *The Beijinger.com* helpful in finding available housing and agents (<https://www.thebeijinger.com/classifieds/housing>).

Then, once her Airbnb stay ended, Victoria connected with a work colleague who allowed her to live in his apartment in between lease contracts. At the end of that period, Victoria found another long-term sublet from a WeChat group of people providing subleases and people looking to sublease. She stayed in that room for two months. During these two months, Victoria was able to get a feel for the area and ultimately decided to find more permanent living accommodations in this neighborhood. She contacted the agent's office on the main floor of the building she was living in at the time to speak with an agent. In response, the agent showed Victoria the spaces that were available and the associated prices of each unit. Once negotiations were settled, Victoria found an apartment that allows her to walk 15 minutes to work and live in an area that she was already familiar with.

Victoria also told me that scamming is a very real possibility. "Just know it might happen. Everyone's trying to scam you, especially if you're a foreigner." Naturally my question that followed was, "How do you minimize being a victim of scams?" Victoria responded with the following strategies to help mitigate scams: foreigners should make

sure that they thoroughly read their contracts (or have someone who can read Mandarin translate) and inspect the space themselves, not just accept what the agent says about it. But because scams are unlikely to be completely avoided when using an agency, “low-key scams” (scams that are less severe and also avoidable) can be mitigated by making efforts to negotiate a lower rent price with the agent. Living spaces can range anywhere from as low as 3,000 RMB to 10,000 RMB (roughly \$472 USD to \$1576 USD) for just rent alone, depending on the area. As for rent costs, Victoria, cautioned me: “You can get a cheap place, but you’re getting what you’re paying for.”

The task of finding an agent also relies heavily on the social networks that foreigners have access to, because foreigners typically find agents through recommendations of friends. When I asked Kevin about how he found his apartment in Beijing after moving from the United States, he responded, “I can connect you to an agent who’s trustworthy.” His response indicated that finding a trustworthy agent depends on good recommendations from friends or coworkers. Expatriates looking for housing options without a community network to call on take alternative routes. Another way of finding an agent is by using local agencies like “*I love my home*” (我爱我家/*Wǒ ài wǒjiā*) or “*Homes for Rent*” (链家/*Liànjiā*) that specialize in connecting people with available housing options. Generally speaking, agents across the board will require at least the equivalent of first month’s rent for their services. Alternatively, if foreigners are able to connect person-to-person then they can avoid agency fees altogether, allowing the newcomer to save a bit of money and for the outgoing person to simply pass on their lease without having to finish out their contract.

The reality for some foreigners in Beijing is that there is a chance that they will be moving around a lot during their first year in the city. This is dependent on how long they intend to stay. For people like Victoria, Leo, and Debby, finding a relatively permanent housing arrangement was imperative because they planned to live in Beijing for a long period of time. Furthermore, having a permanent housing situation is a way for foreigners to feel more comfortable as they adjust to life in Beijing.

Getting Around

In terms of navigating the city itself, I quickly realized that Beijing is a transportation hub. Traveling within the city and traversing the suburbs and urban areas is achievable given that Beijing has one of the largest subways systems in the world and a fleet of public buses and taxis (Travel Guide China n.d.). Given the low fares, Beijing's public transportation system is relatively affordable. Other means of transportation also include bicycling. Recently, bike sharing programs like *MoBike* and *ofo*, have become very popular in China's big cities. Riders use their smartphones to connect with an app to rent bicycles throughout the city without needing to own a bicycle of their own. My professors in Beijing also told me to be wary of black cars that pose as taxi cabs because they are not licensed by the Chinese government as legal taxis. Moreover, there is always about a "25% chance that a Chinese taxi driver will ignore" the hails of someone if they are anything other than White-passing or Chinese.

Shopping

The Black people I spoke to stated that they brought as many goods from home as they could fit in their suitcases. These goods typically fall into the categories of

foodstuffs from countries of origin, hair and body care products, and clothing that fits bodies that do not conform to conventional Chinese size standards. Inevitably, these goods run out or fall into disrepair and then Black expats ask themselves... “Now what?” In terms of buying specific products for hair, body care, or even specific spices, Black expats utilize WeChat groups. If they have enough command of Mandarin or a willing Mandarin-speaking friend, they will use *Táobǎo* (淘宝), which is essentially the Chinese version of Amazon. On *Táobǎo* and through connections made through WeChat, newcomers to Beijing can find pretty much anything, including shea butter, hair extensions, and curry powder. Between *Táobǎo* and WeChat, you can find it— all you have to do is ask.

In regards to finding clothing and shoes that fit bodies different from the normative Chinese body types (that tend to be smaller and thinner), many foreigners only shop when they return home or go to countries that have clothing that accommodates their bodies. For those who are in China for long periods of time, another option is buying fabric and then finding tailors to make clothing specifically for their bodies. One informant utilized tailor services to create custom dresses for formal work events and dinners. Otherwise, shopping at larger, global brands like H&M or its subsidiary Zara, are also options for finding clothing that accommodates a wider range of body types and sizes.

Navigating Language Barriers and School Life

Leo arrived first in Wuhan, China for a semester abroad while pursuing his undergraduate degree in 2007. On an unfortunate day trying to play basketball, Leo broke

his leg and, because his insurance was provided by the Chinese university, he was unable to return home at the end of the semester. As a result, Leo decided to transfer to the Chinese university to complete his majors in broadcast journalism and media studies. But how did his family react? Leo's mother was supportive but extremely nervous, while his father was "all for it". With the financial support of scholarships, extra help from professors, and rigorous self-teaching, Leo completed his thesis and graduated in 2008 after a year and a half of classes taught completely in Mandarin Chinese.

A major hurdle for many people moving to China, especially students, is the language barrier. While Mandarin is the official language of China, there are many dialects that even native Mandarin speakers find difficult to understand. In a country with over 50 ethnic minorities, the wide variations in language is unsurprising. Those lucky enough to live in major cities like Beijing, Shanghai, or Chengdu may be able to get away with speaking "just enough" Mandarin to get around, but language was cited as the number one hurdle for each of my 22 informants, myself included. Mandarin Chinese language classes are typically a foundational part of study abroad programs, yet for Master's programs, even though opportunities for language acquisition are offered, they are not prioritized after the first semester or so. Informants pursuing Master's degrees identified time management, prioritization, and not "sticking with it" as major reasons for their lack of learning Mandarin Chinese.

Many participants that I interviewed agree that their lives in China would improve if they were able to speak the language. Alternatively, foreigners with Mandarin abilities felt that they were better able to connect with Chinese culture, even if they do not speak with perfect fluency. As the Chinese say, "Study hard and everyday you will improve"

(“好好学习，天天向上”/ “*Hǎo hào xuéxí, tiāntiān xiàngshàng*”). Students like Jackie are a testament to this. Like Leo, Jackie, who hails from the Caribbean, arrived in China without any previous Mandarin language training, intending to learn more about International Relations and Chinese language. After five years in China, Jackie has not only completed a Bachelor’s, but also a Master’s degree after writing and defending her thesis in Mandarin. As someone who intentionally stayed away from the language immersion track on my own study abroad program, I wanted to know how non-Mandarin speakers navigated educational curricula taught completely in Mandarin. Students like Leo and Jackie told me the key to succeeding in Chinese universities included audio recording class lectures to review later at home, self-teaching by buying textbooks in both English and Chinese, reviewing professors’ Powerpoints throughout the semester, finding Chinese friends who are willing to help, and when all else fails, “kissing the professors’ asses until they develop a soft spot for the foreign girl.”

The tactic of “kissing the professors’ asses until they develop a soft spot for the foreign girl” requires persistence. During her time in school, Jackie religiously attended her professor’s office hours in order to get as much face time as possible to ask questions regarding class material. In doing so, Jackie also found that professors who seemed too busy to help would “encourage [yo]u to find a student who understands and can explain [the class content].” Professors are preoccupied with thesis papers and articles that their students are trying to publish, especially in Master’s programs. This is compounded by the reality that professors are teaching more than one class, each with 30+ students, and professors may find themselves crunched for too little time to hold the hands of a foreign student.

Moreover, in Chinese universities, it is not common practice for students to ask the professor questions during class for “fear of being openly wrong” and displaying ignorance. Rather, it is common practice for professors to lecture uninterrupted during the three hour class period that may permit students to have two 10 minute breaks. As a foreigner attending a Chinese university, Jackie, like other foreign students, had to adjust to this alternative teaching style. The “finding Chinese friends who are willing to help” strategy can also prove to be challenging because of the different learning styles between Chinese and foreign students.

When I first started classes I felt awkward because the lecturer would talk about some really complicated stuff but no one asked questions so I thought I was the only one who was lost so I decided after the classes I would ask my classmates if they understood and could help explain something for me— they’d tell me they didn’t understand either... I’ve asked why don’t they ask [a]n[d] it’s because it’s not *common practice* and it’s a little intimidating ... no one wants to be openly wrong.

In an effort to remedy the malpractice of in-class questions, some Chinese students may oftentimes get together in an attempt to figure out what the professor’s lecture meant. Alternatively, these group sessions can simply include “just copying some notes and answers from students in the year group before. [Because the] curriculum doesn’t really change.” All of this being said, with enough determination and focus, foreign students do succeed in Chinese educational institutions. In June of 2017, Jackie was awarded her MBA after attending classes taught completely in Mandarin Chinese on the topics of international law and economics, which culminated in her successful writing and defense of her thesis in International Trade.

Home and Family

When foreigners, especially students, move to China, they described their families (and friends) as being excited. Nevertheless, this excitement was clouded in a shroud of nervousness and uncertainty because of the “foreignness” of Asia. Mary is a graduate student enrolled in a Master’s program in Beijing and from a southern country in Africa. Her family imagined East Asia as a land of mystery. When Mary decided to pursue International Relations in China, her family had preconceived stereotypes about Asia as a whole, but these misconceptions are not unique to Mary’s family. Many informants said that their families and friends back home expressed concerns ranging from personal safety to diet to how to care for curly, kinky hair where that is not the norm. Other stereotypes that foreigners may have been exposed to about China is the use of *ching chong* that supposedly mimics the way Chinese people speak, or that every Chinese person knows kung fu, that Chinese men have Fu Manchu mustaches, and that China is the land of counterfeit consumer products. These stereotypes are mirrored in the preconceptions Chinese people have about foreigners, especially Black people.

Gradually, as Black foreigners spend more time in China, these stereotypes give way to a more nuanced understanding of Chinese people and culture. Based on my own experiences and my informants’ accounts, the families of recent Beijing transplants often desire reassurance that their loved ones are safe, well taken care of, and adapting to life in China, in an effort to soothe their own anxieties. However, prior to the technological development of virtual private networks (VPNs) and video calling services such as Skype, phone cards and emails were the only way for Beijing transplants to communicate with their family and friends back home. Recently, thanks to the proliferating use of

VPNs to bypass China's Great Firewall, students, foreigners, and native Chinese alike have access to additional modes of communication to stay in touch with communities overseas. Typically, returning "home" for my informants was only possible under select conditions: if their travel was externally funded or subsidized, if they were planning to be home for a significant period of time (usually a couple of months), or if they were able to take the time off needed to travel home and return to China. While studying abroad in China, at least two or three of my informants actually had family members come visit them. One informant chose a Master's program in Beijing because another close family member was also completing a job assignment in the same city.

Because so few expatriates have family members visit them in China, and finding the time and funding to return home is often times too costly, the majority of my informants described the disappointment associated with missing out on important family events and holidays back home. Patricia, like other informants, still gets homesick, even after living in Beijing for the past ten years. She left her home in the Caribbean to further her education utilizing government scholarships. During this time, Patricia has acquired two advanced degrees and works as an Executive Officer for a non-governmental organization that facilitates and hosts fundraising initiatives for low-income families. She describes that gradually, time feels like it begins to pass by faster and faster, leaving little time for her to realize how many years pass by between her visits home. When Patricia first arrived in Beijing, she went home after the first three years, then again two years later. Overall in the past decade, Patricia returned home four times. Her story is not unlike many of the other informants I interviewed. In another instance, as I wrote above,

Leo's semester abroad led to his transferring to a Chinese university and completion of his undergraduate studies at that same institution.

In Leo's case, he was unable to return home after suffering an injury. During this year, Leo discovered that he could receive scholarships from the Chinese university so he stayed and finished his thesis in broadcast journalism and media studies. The academic rigor he experienced in the United States was the same as at the Chinese institution, although there was a difference in teaching pedagogy — the Chinese university focused primarily on the theoretical rather than the practical. Another student, Daisy, decided to pursue a Master's degree in China and left behind a professional job in her home in Lesotho. Daisy expressed positive feelings towards living abroad, especially as a student receiving significant financial assistance.

I travel because I like the difference, right. [...] I'm looking for that adventure. I can go back home until the age of 70, live there; but coming to China and doing my Masters is not something that's always going to be a possibility. And having somebody else pay for it is just like, are you kidding me? I'm getting paid to be happy! Studying is not easy, but when you've worked, ha! Studying is a blessing!

But for many people, the idea of moving to a country where they become the "other" and are inhibited by cultural and linguistic differences can be a daunting and scary experience. This journal excerpt serves as an example of the fear and uncertainty that individuals face once they've made the choice to live abroad.

I'm going to be in Beijing for about 4 months... this is going to be my longest time outside of the US. The dreaded staring is already beginning and I think that I even saw someone taking a photo of Ms. BB and me while we were leaving the airport. I'm definitely hoping that I find a better way to cope with my extreme 'otherness' here.

Feelings of homesickness, loneliness, and fear are definitely present in the psyche of Black expats choosing to live abroad. But more importantly are the feelings of excitement, power, and strength that Black expats need to exist in a city such as Beijing.

Adjusting to Life in China

For my informants who had previous experience living abroad, moving to China was less of a culture shock. Bree, from the U.S., had previous experience living abroad and contrasted her experiences with foreigners who had little experience traveling to and living in a different country.

For other people you'll probably talk to, it's probably been difficult for them because it's their first international experience. Maybe they'll be younger, that kind of thing. I've lived abroad before, so it's not unusual for me. I'll get on the subway: where am I going today? I don't know. I'll get on the bus, where am I going today? There's some people who have been here a year and haven't gone to the Great Wall yet.

Bree's response is clearly one of a well-traveled person accustomed to living abroad. But for Bria, moving to China from the United States to teach English was a difficult process: "It was scary! Like I couldn't go to anybody because who has gone to China that I know, in my realm? So that was a little frustrating." As Black expatriates adjust to living in China, there are multiple instances of cultural mismatching that make the transition difficult. For example there are different expectations of customer service in China than in the West. In restaurants, waiters will not return after taking and filling your order if you do not shout "Waiter!" ("服务员儿!" / "*Fúwùyuáner!*") across the restaurant to get their attention. You will simply remain at your table, possibly until the restaurant closes. Moreover, the very Western habit of splitting checks is an unfamiliar concept in Chinese restaurants, as one person will simply cover the entire bill with the understanding the other person will pay next time.

Even with all of these adjustments the question still remains. Why do Black expatriates move to Beijing? The answer is by no means simple nor concise. Black expatriates move to China and specifically to Beijing for educational, professional, and

personal reasons that are not uncommon in instances of emigration and immigration. When Black expatriates arrive in China, they have to find housing, purchase goods, do well in their academic or professional environments, and if they so choose, communicate with friends and family “back home”, all the while adjusting to Chinese culture. But they seldom do this alone. Therefore, the creation of and calling on social networks enable new arrivals to be transition more smoothly into the ways of being in Beijing. The transitory period for newcomers can be simplified with the help of community networks, thereby helping Black expatriates to find their niche and better learn how to navigate Beijing.

In order to adapt and settle into their new lives in Beijing, Black expatriates are continuously exchanging “goods, ideas [...] and emotions” as they engage in the dynamic social networks throughout the city (Cole and Groes 2016: 6). Therefore, I agree with Groes and Cole (2016), that an analysis of these “affective circuits” provides the appropriately critical lens my research calls for in order to understand how social networks engage various actors, including Black expatriates, as they engage in Beijing’s cityscape. In the next chapter, I examine how Black expatriates form communities with each other, other foreigners, and their Chinese counterparts and how the dynamics of community formation change with the advancing uses of technology.

Chapter III: Community Formation

So when I first came I was a student and so my community was my roommate and then a couple of friends that we made in our exchange program.[...] We were all English speakers so you had to work extra hard to interact with local students. [...] I saw students who were African when I came back as an intern [a couple years later]. But, WeChat wasn't a thing in 2010, at least it wasn't to my knowledge. And so when I came back [after my internship], I found out about WeChat and I knew I was gonna be here long term. When you're not a student and you're working, you don't want your only friends to be the people that you work with. In case work goes south, you need more friends than that. So I made a concerted effort to reach out. I was a part of a travel group on Facebook called "Nomadness".

Victoria's story is common for foreigners who have made multiple trips to China over time. Within ten years, China has seen tremendous changes taking place. When Victoria first traveled to China from the United States, she experienced the country as a student for these first three trips. Before 2010, Victoria's community was defined by those living close to her. Post 2010, with changes in technology, Victoria's community expanded to those within the reach of the internet. Moreover, with the development of the app WeChat and social media sites specifically targeting and connecting Black travelers, Victoria's community expanded nearly tenfold when she returned. This chapter explores how Black expatriates formed communities pre-2010 and post-2010 and how the changing technologies or *technoscapes* and *mediascapes* enables disparate Black people in China and around the world to create groups based on interest and utility.

The prevalence of social media since the early 2000s is increasingly becoming an integral part of many people's daily lives. It is estimated that 4.77 billion people worldwide own a mobile phone— this figure is forecasted to reach 5.07 billion by 2019 (The Statistics Portal 2015). Moreover, an estimated 2.46 billion people around the world

in 2017 using some kind of social media. Projections for the number of social media users around the world is expected to increase year after year with forecasts for the year 2021 reaching an estimated 3.02 billion users (The Statistics Portal 2017). It is unsurprising that, given the undisputed reality of social media, individuals are not only connecting based on their geographic proximity, but through the creation of online networks as well. Black expatriates in Beijing and throughout the world rely on social media technologies to create and participate in various communities that are both geographically near and far. The transient nature of expatriates also relies on the connective mechanisms of technology to provide some stability to an otherwise amorphous and temporary community. Facebook, WeChat, YouTube and other social media platforms allow new community members to join even before they have reached China and allows existing members to stay connected once they leave the country.

Pre-2010

In the time before social media was invented or widely used, when Black expatriates arrived in China they formed communities based on those geographically close to them. Black students in China developed ties with other students in their institutions with whom they shared some similarities. They met on campus, at networking events, or in the dormitories and joined the pre-established networks provided by academic institutions. Black professionals created community with their coworkers. Black expatriates returning to China would be in contact with friends and family that they knew previously. Other opportunities for Black expatriates to find community depend on the individual's creation of a routine. For example, I met Marsha from Europe, who regularly attended church before moving to Beijing. After some time she found a church

and is now a member of a Bible study group that meets on a regular basis. In a similar fashion, Kevin from the United States is an avid chess player and, upon seeing a poster in a bar, started meeting regularly with a group of Chinese people and other foreigners to play chess.

However, even when Black people do create routines for themselves, the problem with expatriate communities is that their members are transient and only in one place for a set period of time before they travel to some place else. The majority of the foreign students, professionals, and travelers that I met in China did not plan to stay in China long-term. Leo and Stacy from America, and Daniel from Nigeria had lived in China for seven or more years. Since I interviewed them in 2017, Leo has moved to Nigeria and Daniel has relocated to Korea. Only Patricia from the Caribbean and Charlie from Canada had lived in China for 10 and 15 years, respectively, at the time of their interviews in 2017. The transience of expatriate communities leaves some people feeling isolated even if they are near a community of other expatriates. For Daniel from Senegal, coming to China alone was a challenge. “Normally when [African] people come to China, they come in groups, you know, stuff like that. But I came alone. So I was just struggling because I didn’t know where the Senegalese were.” And even when Daniel did find his fellow countrymen, there was not an instant connection of familiarity.

I felt like an outsider. Because I was from a different city and most of the Senegalese guys were from the capitol city. So we do things a little different from my place. But then two months later we got along just fine. We all Senegalese, but then we in a different country. But then we felt like family because I’m from the same country. It was ok.

Daniel’s story indicates that having darker skin, coming from the same country, and speaking the same language are not enough to instantaneously create a sense of community. Furthermore, the language barrier also poses a significant challenge for

foreigners. In an expatriate's earliest days and weeks in a country where they do not speak the language, they unsurprisingly face isolation because they do not speak Mandarin. Like Daniel, Marsha from Europe by way of Ghana also felt isolated when she first arrived in China, "Beijing can be a place that is very lonely as well. I think it's because of the language barrier, I think it's because of that sort of not being very familiar, you know, just trying to find your way, trying to find your ground." Feelings of loneliness and exclusion are reflected in many of my informants' interviews.

Post-2010

After 2010, the number of Black foreigners in China increased and technology advanced. These two specific changes had an impact on the Black expatriate communities around the world. In China specifically, Black expatriates became more visible digitally through YouTube channels, Facebook pages, and other travel blogs engaging with the growing audience of Black travelers. This digital visibility helped connect Black expatriates to their places of origin, as well as with other expatriates traveling in places near and far.

One technology has reshaped and connected Black expatriates who would have never met if their geographic routes never intersected. The release of WeChat, a "mobile instant text and voice messaging communication service" forever changed the digital and physical communication landscape for all users (Che et al. 2014).

So obviously WeChat was the best way to meet people... You get in a WeChat group. We got the Black Life China, Black Life Beijing, Black Americans in China, and then you can even get outside of those groups that are [...] divided by race or ethnicity. You got groups here that for hair, for selling things, for nerds, for video game players, chess club, book club. I got one of those— like so many WeChat groups here, man. Circles here that you get involved in to meet people to do things, you know.

I first encountered WeChat late in 2016, just before arriving in Beijing. It was not until I arrived in Beijing, that I understood the many uses of this single application, as Kevin described above. During my time in China, I witnessed WeChat used to do everything from finding people who like to go rock climbing to ordering a taxi, in addition to the more “basic” text and voice messaging for communication between people. On the surface, WeChat is “a mobile instant text and voice messaging communication service developed by Tencent Holdings Ltd. in China on January 21, 2011” (Che et al. 2014). After only 2 years, the app had over 355 million monthly average users (MAUs) at the end of 2013— and by 2016, WeChat had 600+ million MAUs (Che 2014; Jiezhong et al 2016). While this app is primarily used in China, WeChat is also available in 200+ countries, operates in 18 languages, and is supported on all major smartphone operating systems (iPhone, Windows Phone, and Android) (Che et al. 2014). Furthermore, WeChat is free to install, download, and use in terms of basic text and voice messaging.

To those unfamiliar with the app, I offer this brief WeChat user run-through. WeChat allows its users to communicate through text messages, voice messages/calls, and video calls. More specifically, this functionality includes text-messaging, hold-to-talk voice messaging, group messaging, photo and video sharing, location sharing, and contact information exchange (Che et al. 2014). In a manner that goes beyond simple messaging, WeChat users create a profile which features basic user demographics such as gender, region, and age, making WeChat similar to Facebook (which is blocked in China). As a part of their profiles, users are also able to share photographs in their Moments, making for further similarities between WeChat and Facebook.

Comparing Applications: The Battle of the Apps

At the end of 2017 Facebook had about 2.13 billion MAUs worldwide, with 1.4 billion daily active users (DAUs) and about five new profiles created every second (Facebook n.d.; Zephoria Inc 2018). Facebook's users account for about 26.3% of the world's population and is popular in North America, Latin America and the Caribbean, and notably banned in China (The Statistics Portal 2017). In comparison, another popular text and video messaging app called WhatsApp that was released in 2009 has about 1.5 billion MAUs who send an average of 60 billion messages per day (Red Pixels Ventures Limited 2018; Olson 2014). Malaysia, Germany, and Brazil, as of 2016, are the top three countries where 60%, 55%, and 53% of their population, respectively, are active WhatsApp users (The Statistics Portal 2018). WeChat and WhatsApp are relatively similar insofar as both applications are available in 20+ languages and allows users to send video, voice, and text messages, share documents, desktop and cellphone access with any phone that has access to data and the internet (WhatsApp Inc n.d.).

Compared to apps used in the United States and in contrast to Whatsapp, WeChat centralizes the functionalities of multiple apps into the convenience of one singular app. In addition to text and voice messaging, users can also order taxis or *didi*, pay their bill at a restaurant, buy goods from a grocery store, and send and receive money from other users. From an American perspective, I would have to use several different apps to do those things; for example, I would use Uber or Lyft to order a taxi, Venmo to send and receive money from other users, and Apple Pay or Android Pay (depending on my cell phone's operating system) to pay for my bill in a restaurant or to buy groceries, assuming the store accepted those forms of payment in the first place. In China, WeChat has been

seamlessly integrated into society. Inside WeChat are tens of millions of third-party apps, essentially providing its users with the world at their fingertips.

Using WeChat in China

WeChat can also be used for both work and play, as Kevin describes during his earliest days using the app: “And then I realized that there was a whole other world to WeChat outside of work, yo. A few people that I was working with put me on to WeChat and then a few of my Black colleagues from other schools were like, ‘Hey! Join *Black Life Beijing!*’” With the invention of WeChat, people’s circles in China expanded beyond their geographic limits. WeChat allowed working expatriates and foreign students in China alike, to increase the size of their social networks, at least on a digital scale. Given the membership size of some WeChat groups, it is unlikely that you will meet every member. Kevin describes such a scenario with one group called *Black Life Beijing*: “[...] *Black Life Beijing* has about, what? 300 people in it? You’d be lucky to meet 10 of those people. You know, from that specific group.” But regardless of the WeChat groups you are a part of, one of the best ways to meet people is still by going out into the streets of Beijing. Leo from the U.S. explains the value of “hitting the streets.”

Going out, hitting the streets. The expat community, while Beijing is a huge city, the expat community is extremely small. Because of how small the expat community is there’s always something going on. It’s just an opportunity to meet people, you know. If you don’t know— if you don’t have any friends, that’s by decision, you know. And that’s the other reason why I love Beijing.

Leo’s advice is worth following because “hitting the streets” is how I was able to join different communities in Beijing. But before I was ready to start “hitting the streets”, I needed to create a WeChat account.

WeChat users create a profile (as seen in figure 2) which features basic user demographics such as gender, region, and age; making WeChat similar to Facebook which is blocked in China. As a part of their profiles, users are also able to share photographs in their Moments, drawing further similarities between WeChat and Facebook. Companies, celebrities and organizations are also benefiting from WeChat's popularity. By creating an "official account" products can be tested, promotions advertised, and marketed audiences can be found. I personally know several friends in China who use WeChat to promote their own businesses, such as a bakery run out of their apartment, a podcast series, a user-generated news forum, and to promote new ventures. The possibilities on WeChat are endless.

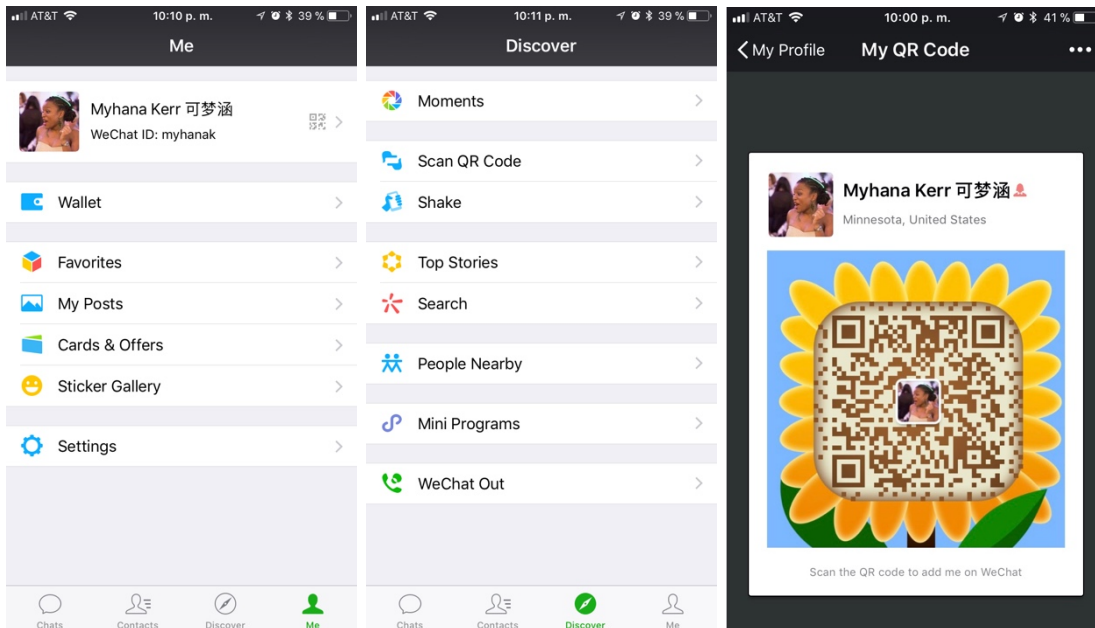


Figure 2: 'Profile', 'Discover', and User QR code WeChat screenshots

In the case of China specifically, WeChat benefits from “The Great Firewall”, which blocks popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter for example, therefore making WeChat the next best thing with little to no competition. However, Facebook’s capabilities do not even come close to those of WeChat— only in 2015 did Facebook’s Messenger, an internal application, allow its users to send money to others, embed moving media images and GIFs into messages, and provide in-app package tracking (Kosoff 2015).

To my surprise, many people in my own network in the United States used WeChat, but solely to communicate with others living outside of the United States, primarily in Asia. However, until I added even more contacts and arrived in Beijing with a working data plan, I was blind to WeChat’s plethora of features. “What’s your WeChat?” and “你用微信吗?” (“*Nǐ yòng wēixìn ma?*”) were regular phrases in my vocabulary during my time in China. When I met new people, I would scan their QR (Quick Response) code that contained a link to their WeChat account so that we could stay in touch (see figure 2). After creating a profile, users can post pictures, videos, and other text to share their experiences with friends. I soon adapted to sending my friends voice messages and stickers to communicate. I mapped my routes to the pins my friends dropped and translated messages that I didn't quite understand from Chinese to English. WeChat was my primary way of finding informants for my research. One connection would lead me to another as willing participants sent me contact information for others who might be interested in my project. While in Beijing, I was part of at least 20 different WeChat groups. During most conversations, the name of at least three different WeChat

groups come up and chances are that at least one person in a group of four will want to be added to one of the groups mentioned.

This is how I became a member of so many groups. I would hear Stacy from the US mention that there was a game night happening at Daisy's apartment and she was planning to cook food from her hometown in Lesotho and Sondra would bring a dish from Ghana, while Patricia supplied the Caribbean punch for the evening. "There's a group for that? Can you add me to it?" is the typical response when someone hears about a group they want to join. The groups that I was added to reflected my interest in becoming more familiar with the Black expatriate communities in Beijing by being an active participant. One group focused specifically on supporting and building community for Black women in Beijing and mirrors a similar group with a base in Shenzhen. Each group represents different demographics of many separate and overlapping communities. As a Black, Jamaican-American woman with natural hair, I found different groups that called to each aspect of my identity.

Engaging in Digital Communities

My participation in these groups provided me with opportunities to not only meet new people, but to also explore the city of Beijing through movie screenings, reggae concerts, and ways to keep up with Western social media. Using the 'Discover' function on WeChat, I can see posts from other accounts, I can engage by sharing my own content, and engage further by "liking" and "commenting" on posts. There is a WeChat group for literally anything and everything. *Black Women in Beijing* was started in 2011 to build a community and support network for Black Women in the city. The group was inspired by *Black Women of Shenzhen*, a group with the same purpose with a target

audience in a different city. The groups are named with their target audience and purpose in mind. *Natural Goddesses in China* is for Black women throughout China who have natural hair— meaning that it is free of chemical processing. *Africa 2.0* was started in 2010, *#Black Lives Matter China*, *Black Americans in China*, *Twerk & Hip Hop <3* , *Black China Music*, *BLK GEN BEIJING*, *BLK - Beijing: Game Night*, *BLK GEN Talent!*, *BDASA 2016/2017*, *ATLiens in China*, *China on Purpose with a Purpose*, *A2.0 CC Events*, *Black Americans in Beijing*, *Black X Zumba*, *Nani's Creations*, *Tianmi Bakery*, *HaloHummus*, *NNP Nation*, *OPOPO*, *Greater BDASA Community*, and *Pamoja-May 28* are some of the groups I joined while in Beijing. I share a similar sentiment with Leo who once told me that “[...] the energy [from these groups], it’s a great way to keep up to date with current events.” I specifically remember when several groups were having conversations about drama between two American rappers and, while these conversations were discussing current events, they did start to become repetitive. When this happens many people relate to Kevin when he says: “I’m a point where I’m like, ‘New topic, yo. Like god damn. [laughs]’”

I enjoyed watching the specific social dynamics of each group. I particularly enjoyed seeing the way that people communicated with others who they had not ever met before in person and understanding that all “groups have [their own] personalities.” Furthermore, there were active and well-known members in many of the groups who had their own WeChat persona as identified by their usernames and their favorable or unfavorable opinions that they shared within the chat groups. Victoria often teased Kevin because he “posts like the same thing in each group, so I don’t read [messages in the

group]. I don't like respond to any of them, because I don't feel like having the same conversation five different times.”

Social Media For Us, by Us

The growing number of Black expatriates coming to China is increasing year after year, partially due to China's partnerships with African countries and partially due to the growing number of Black people who want to travel outside of their home countries. As Black communities grow in China and form relationships with others abroad, the *technoscape*, which includes social media platforms, changes in response. Outside of WeChat groups, there are also Facebook pages, travel blogs, and YouTube accounts that are targeting Black audiences. *Nomadness Travel Tribe*⁷, *Oneika the Traveller*⁸, *Okayafrica*⁹, *Black & Abroad*¹⁰, *Travel Noire*¹¹, 黑人在中国 (*Black in China*)¹², *Sahelian Outpost*¹³, and *Wode Maya: Bridging the Gap Between Africa and Asia*¹⁴ are a sample of social media resources directed at Black audiences who want to travel generally and some with specific reference to traveling as a Black person in China. Some of these resources have even been adapted to attract viewers through WeChat, specifically by advertising new podcasts or recordings. Others were born out of Black expatriates' desire to produce content for themselves, thereby invoking storytelling as a form of agency. All

⁷ <https://www.nomadnesstv.com/about-nomadness-travel-tribe/>

⁸ <http://www.oneikathetraveller.com/bio>

⁹ <http://www.okayafrica.com/search/?q=travel>

¹⁰ <https://www.weareblackandabroad.com/aboutus/>

¹¹ <https://travelnoire.com/about/>

¹² <https://www.kmatikc.com/black-in-china>

¹³ <http://www.sahelianoutpost.com/about-the-outpost>

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/user/MrGhanaBaby/featured>

of these resources enable Black people to tell their own stories and to engage with the intersectional aspects of their identities. *One People One Purpose Magazine* (OPOPO) is a Beijing based project that “desires to uplift and empower Blacks everywhere” (OPOPO n.d). The creation and sharing of narratives by Black people is a critical component to countering the negative stereotypes assigned to Black people worldwide. Because of “an overabundance of demeaning and often false narratives about Africa and the African diaspora” groups like OPOPO were created to provide counter narratives (OPOPO N.d.). On March 9, 2018, Marvel’s *Black Panther* movie was released in China. To celebrate the film’s Chinese debut, OPOPO rented an entire movie theatre to host a viewing party which featured a red carpet, African drummers, and other performances before the film was shown. Based on the photographs from the event there were Black, non-Black, and Chinese people in attendance. This event represents just one of many instances whereby social media sites and their affiliated communities bring people together.

Dynamic Actors and Changing Communities

The nature of these narratives varies based on the actors involved, as do changes in communities over time. Most of my informants shared stories about how their communities shifted after completing their undergraduate studies in Beijing. Patricia, who has lived in Beijing for over ten years, first came to China as an undergraduate student, later pursued graduate school, and is now a working professional with a high level of Mandarin. Her social networks now include both other foreigners and Chinese people alike. Some Black expatriates more easily and organically find their niche within the mega-city they now call home. I asked Bree, a Black American woman, how she

finds a sense of normalcy in a city with more than 20 million people. Her response was simple.

I make myself comfortable by just doing things I would normally do if I was at home. If I was in New Orleans, I would go to bookstores. Here [in Beijing], what do I do? I found bookstores within like a month of being here. I love to go to art museums and experience culture. I love concerts, I love music. What do I do when I get here? I found concerts, I found music. So it's just a matter of knowing who you are. The type of person you are. And just finding those things to get into, you know?

Marsha found her niche by becoming a part of an ethnically diverse church community. After growing up in the United Kingdom where she was a part of a church community, Marsha was able to recreate a sense of normalcy for herself by finding a church in Beijing. In doing so, Marsha also dispelled her misconceptions of religious tolerance in China.

And I think it's really weird, before I came here, I thought "Oh my gosh.." I think I was just very ignorant and I thought, "Can I even bring a bible to China?" You know? But it's great. We meet up every Wednesday. I'm serving as well, which I thought is just great. I'm doing like stuff there and, yeah. It's a mix, I mean [...] you always miss your family from home, just in general. But I'm really that I feel, I'm growing, I'm learning, I'm meeting really like interesting people [in Beijing]. So I love it.

The community networks that Black expatriates find themselves in is contingent on their geographic proximity and personal (dis)interests in connecting with different demographics of people. Moreover, these stories demonstrate that, when my informants moved to China, they were not just creating community with people like them, but also seeking out relationships with other foreigners and other locals, thereby taking advantage of engaging with people from different backgrounds with different stories themselves.

In the Streets of Beijing

One afternoon, my American friend Jim and I were lost (a common occurrence) in Beijing as we trying (and failing) to locate a barbershop. Kevin had recommended this barber and had sent me the barber's WeChat information, which I then forwarded to my friend Jim, who later messaged the barber and made arrangements to get his haircut that day. In our attempts to find the barber, we wandered into a grocery store with the hope of finding this elusive barber, but without any success. As we stood outside the grocery store, I saw a Black woman and approached her and asked, "Excuse me, do you know where there might be a barbershop around here?" To my surprise, she responded, "Shénme? Shuō zhōngwén." ("What? Speak Chinese." / "什么? 说中文.") In my haste, I falsely assumed that this random Black woman I'd met on the street spoke English. This interaction reminded me of an earlier conversation with Leo that I've carried with me since that day. Leo told me that it's "easy to assume that Black America sets the standard of Blackness."

As I write this ethnography, I am constantly aware of places where my positionality as a Black American may overshadow the alternative viewpoints and experiences of Black people throughout the diaspora. I previously mentioned that it takes more than the amount of melanin in one's skin to create a sense of unity or camaraderie, because everyone's lived experiences vary widely. While I use the generalized terms of Black expatriates or Black Diaspora, I still acknowledge, and I hope you do as well, that there is extreme variety within the identity of "Black". I endeavor to explain these ever-complex and ever-nuanced narratives of Black expatriates and their lives in China because this topic is seldom discussed.

Complexities of Black Experiences

When Black expatriates move to Beijing, they go through an adjustment period to living in a city and trying to operate in language and culture that may be foreign to them. This adjustment period can last anywhere from six weeks to six months to six years. During this time, some people choose to create a rather insular life for themselves within the city of about 20 million people. Because Beijing is an international metropolis, you can navigate the city without interacting with others beyond exchanging idle pleasantries. Ms. BB from an island in the Caribbean, explained how some expatriates feel about living in China.

China is a fairly homogenous country that is in a very nice bubble, right? So you can be here and create your own bubble. You don't need to interact with them [the Chinese] that much. You don't need to learn their history, you don't need to learn their culture. You could operate within your own little bubble.

I was surprised by the number of Black people I met who were living in China without some command of Mandarin. Personally, I was hesitant to travel to China in the first place because I was insecure about my ability to speak Mandarin, even after 10 years of study. Needless to say, without any command of the language I might have chosen to spend a semester in an English or Spanish speaking country. Victoria expressed some strong opinions about expatriates living in China without any knowledge of Mandarin.

Enjoy it [living in China] and learn the doggone language! I've seen too many people here who are like, "I've been here for 5 years!" I'm like, "哦，你可以说中文?" ["Oh, can you speak Chinese?"] "What'd you say?" Like, bruh, learn the language. It goes so far. Learn the language and just take it day by day.

Between not knowing Mandarin and being unfamiliar with Chinese culture, Black expatriates tend to gravitate towards people who are similar to them on the basis of language, nationality, skin color (although this last one seems more common for Black

Americans), or by bonding over the general otherness of being a non-Chinese person in China. Because of the tendencies of “like gravitating to like”, the linguistic and cultural differences among Black expatriates create rifts and disparate communities.

Therefore, the amount of melanin in one’s skin is not enough create communal cohesion and this is where, according to Kevin, Black Africans and Black Americans differ. Kevin posed the question, “What is it to be Black?” I posed this question to several informants and they each responded in a similar manner: “There is no real definition [of Blackness].” For Leo, if Blackness could be defined, there would be bigger issues because, “If there is a definition [of Blackness], it can’t be put into words, which I think is good, because if it could be put into words, it could be put in a bottle and sold. We’re bigger than that.” Kevin echoed similar sentiments, “There are levels to Blackness. What you perceived to be Black is completely different from what I may think to be Black and different from what the next person thinks it means.” Your skin may be darker, your nose may be wider, but what about the liminal spaces and identities that exist and the intersectional identities that people hold? Because of the widely diverse nature of Black diasporic communities “it’s like there’s a whole ocean of difference” that requires more than just skin color to unite people. According to Leo’s observations of Africans in China, they “don’t know what it’s like to be an ethnic minority, unlike Black Americans who are used to seeing themselves in the minority.” Furthermore, as a Black American, Leo reflected that it is “too easy to assume that Black Americans set the standards for Blackness” and so there is a “need for Black Americans to humble themselves” to the plights of immigration that their non-American counterparts face, amongst other

hardships. One critical way for Black diasporic communities to overcome this “whole ocean of difference” as Leo described, is for each group to learn the other’s histories.

Unity Among Black Expatriates

One place that I saw unity within the Black expatriate community was on a Chinese university’s campus. I spent an afternoon with Mary from southern Africa, asking about her first few months in Beijing in a dormitory lounge. We spoke about how she came to see what all the hype in China was about and her current participation in an African Student Association (ASA) on campus. In the running for joining the executive board for ASA, Mary was in the process of completing her first year abroad in China. All ASA executive members must have already spent one year at the university before they are eligible for election. As Mary explained, the goals of ASA are to promote a sense of unity, equity, and community for all African students on the university’s campus and to combat any and all forms of discrimination. ASA appeals to African students by providing them with a home away from home community, where students can all bond through their ties to their respective countries. Furthermore, ASA relies on the host-institution to provide enriching opportunities to African students during their time in school, in order for them to join the growing alumni network— thereby helping the host-institution with its recruitment efforts within African countries for talented African youth. ASA hosts a variety of events such as panel discussions, lecture speakers about China-Africa relations, alumni networking sessions, and opportunities for cultural exchange within the group and with the larger Chinese community. When I attended ASA’s events, its audience was always a diverse group of people from African countries, China, the United States, and other countries.

Outside of the campus setting, interactions between Black expatriates vary based on the individual. For some, living as a minority in China is something that they are accustomed to. For others, living in China as a minority becomes a shocking reality that yields different reactions. However, from the cultural shock of living in China, intentional communities are formed. Recall the WeChat group, *Black Women in Beijing*, that I previously described. Debbie, an active participant from the Caribbean, told me the story of the group's earliest days. Within an hour of the group's inception in 2011, 68 people joined and within three hours, the group had 100 members—the group was spreading like wildfire. After three days, the WeChat group could not accept any more members so another *Black Women in Beijing* WeChat group was created. Eight years later, *Black Women in Beijing* is still a thriving group that has led to a “vibrant and engaged community” of Black women. I went to one event co-hosted by *Africa 2.0* and *Black Women in Beijing* for a screening of the movie, *Hidden Figures*. After the movie, we (everyone in attendance), discussed the importance of having space for a Black, female community, and the value in seeking and pursuing any and all opportunities that may improve their position within society. And on top of these important discussion points, in our Black bodies we have to “kill people with kindness” in order to counter the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of Black people's expressions and actions.

Outside of Black Expat Circles

In Beijing, Black foreigners not only associate with each other, they also interact with other foreigners. And as a whole, the expatriate communities in Beijing are extremely transitory. Foreigners come to China for varying periods of time to complete schooling, job assignments, and vacations, and their arrival is always for a limited period

of time. Very few foreigners, especially Black foreigners, travel to China with the intention of making the country their new permanent home. Therefore, any groups that form are constantly in flux as individuals arrive and leave. In an attempt to cope with being in a new place, some people seek out companionship with others who may become their anchors. But what happens when an individual's anchors are constantly appearing and disappearing? "Expats are good at saying goodbye," said Leo as we sat in a cafe in the *Sanlitun* district. For most foreigners, it is rare for them to permanently settle in Beijing, especially if they are families with children. Furthermore, because most foreigners are only in Beijing until their work or study contracts expire, people are constantly moving in and out of the city. The best and worst part of living in such a megacity is that you are always "meeting lots of interesting people, but you know they're going to leave." When Leo returned to Beijing after 18 months of living in the United States, he knew the geographic landscape, but the social landscape of Beijing had changed completely. As he began readjusting, Leo called on his few remaining friends who helped him make new connections in an unfamiliar social scene.

In the Long Run...

Moving to Beijing is a daunting life change for some. Marsha recounts her first couple weeks in Beijing as "a place that's very lonely as well. I think it's because of the language barrier, I think it's [also] because of that sort of not being [in a] very familiar place, you know? [You're] just trying to find your way, trying to find your ground." Mary, a Master's student from southern Africa, also expressed that "Beijing can be lonely" because of culture shock. Over time, both Mary's and Marsha's networks came to include friends from all walks of life, Chinese and non-Chinese alike. Not only was

Marsha moving to a new country and a new city, she was also returning to school to pursue a MBA.

I'm someone that has worked for 10 years, so coming to do my MBA as well, has been a bit of a [change]. I'm going back to school, so I guess that's another reason why I'm really keen to connect with people and to hear their experiences of Beijing. And you know, share our war stories, and share our joys as well. So I've really love it. I think it's been... I've grown a lot in six months.

I also found Stacy's sentiments about living in China particularly interesting. Stacy first came to China on an exchange program and became so enamored that she moved back to China years later, but without any intention of staying— at first. Now, after living in China for seven years, learning Mandarin, living in an older part of Beijing with her husband (also a Black foreigner), and working to recruit international students to study in China, Stacy told me that she considers Beijing home. Whenever she travels back to the United States from China to visit her family she says, "*Wǒ huí běijīng, wǒ qù měiguó.*" ("I return [permanently] to Beijing and [temporarily] visit the United States.") ("我回北京，我去美国.") This statement reflects that Stacy now considers her "home" to be Beijing and so she returns to Beijing and she is only temporarily traveling to visit the U.S.. Stacy is proof that "If you work hard to integrate yourself into Chinese culture, [Beijing] captures you" and you might even consider it home one day.

Achieving Stacy's level of comfort in Beijing is a process. Regardless of how long they plan to stay, expatriates must learn to navigate the Chinese people, media, and institutions that they encounter every day. In the next chapter, I focus on the day-to-day interactions between Black expatriates and their native Chinese counterparts and how the Chinese conceptualize a hierarchy of bodies on the basis of nationality and language in order to understand how the bodies of Black and white foreigners are imagined and

perceived within Chinese society. These interactions are not always positive because of the many occasions when Black bodies are used to benefit Chinese products at the expense of perpetuating false stereotypes about Black people for profit, but they are mandatory nonetheless.

Chapter IV: Relations with Chinese

In this chapter, I focus on the day-to-day interactions between Black expatriates and their native Chinese counterparts and how the Chinese conceptualize a hierarchy of bodies on the basis of nationality and language in order to understand how the bodies of Black and white foreigners are imagined and perceived within Chinese society. I rely on observing and describing person-to-person and on-the-ground relationships between Chinese people and Black people to illustrate how these hierarchies place Chinese and white people above all others, and places Black bodies at the very bottom. Furthermore, I analyze specific case studies that exemplify how images of Black people are problematically displayed in local, national, and international Chinese media outlets. I conclude the chapter by examining what colors Black people's interactions with Chinese people and the strategies they use to navigate uncomfortable situations associated with being a foreigner in China, draw on specific instances in Chinese cities where racial incidents are exposed and called out when the Black communities speak up and mobilize.

In the previous chapters, I explained the modality of Black expatriates' lives in China and how they form communities amongst themselves and their Chinese counterparts. However, I have yet to discuss how Black expatriates interact on a day to day basis with the Chinese people they live, work, and study with, aside from the brief snapshots provided in earlier chapters. A year after I initially conducted interviews in Beijing, I realized that while I had stories of casual and not-so-casual anti-Blackness in China, I was not able to pinpoint a salient enough example of how specific Chinese actors, more specifically Chinese media, used Black (specifically African) bodies to serve a purpose. At least this was the case until the Lunar New Year of 2018.

On the eve-of the Lunar or Chinese New Year in February of 2018, Chinese state media put on a show that depicted Africans in a highly disrespectful manner, hinting at a different perception of the relationship between China and Africa. “Share the Same Joy and Happiness” (“同喜同福”) was the name of the skit meant to celebrate the friendly relationship between China and Africa (figure 3). The skit begins with Shakira’s song, “Waka Waka (This Time for Africa)”, used during the 2010 FIFA World Cup hosted in South Africa, as Africans dressed in colorful clothing dance down the aisles through the crowd and towards the stage. The stage is set with a savannah background and filled with African men and women dancing in what might be perceived as “traditional” African garb. There are dancing antelope and zebra puppets behind the dancers and drummers. The host for this skit is a Chinese named Zhèng Kǎi (郑恺) (Koetse 2018).



Figure 3: Railway Staff Trainees
(<https://www.whatsonweibo.com/cctv-spring-festival-galas-racist-africa-comedy-sketch/>)



Figure 4: Kerry, her Boss, Boss' Brother, Kerry's Mother and her monkey companion
(<http://www.whatsonweibo.com/cctv-spring-festival-galas-racist-africa-comedy-sketch/>)

Rather than setting this skit in an unnamed African country, the skit is said to take place in Kenya where the Chinese host, the dancers who play the “local people”, and railway workers are celebrating the recent opening of the new train route between Mombasa and Nairobi, a project that was 80% financed by the Export-Import Bank of China (Koetse 2018; Kacungira 2017; Export-Import Bank of China 2017).

The singing and dancing eventually transition to the Chinese host having the African railway staff introduce themselves and speak of their excitement about their newly acquired training thanks to the Chinese university instruction (see figure 4). After the stewardesses have spoken and leave the stage, a young African woman— a late arrival— runs onto the stage and asks the Chinese host (her boss) for a favor. Kerry, the young woman, was late because her mother was trying to set her up on a blind date. Kerry has absolutely no interest in going on a blind date, and she asks her boss if he will pretend to be her lover, even though her boss is already slated to be married to a Chinese woman. Up until this point, “Share the Same Joy and Happiness” had been a relatively inoffensive sketch. It is when Kerry’s mother takes the stage that the skit becomes both controversial and offensive.

The well-known Chinese actress Lóu Nǎimíng (娄乃鸣) plays Kerry’s African mother and enters the stage covered in blackface, wearing a fruit basket, and wearing padding to overtly enlarge her bosom and buttocks, in parody of a stereotypical “African” aesthetic (Koetse 2018). Adding to the tone-deaf nature of the scene is a Black man wearing a monkey costume, and playing the role of the mother’s pet companion. During the African mother’s time on stage, she passionately expresses her love for China and Chinese people.

In a similarly gratuitous manner, Kerry explains to her mother that she does not want to get married, preferring to study in China and join the ranks of the hard-working Chinese people. Lóu Nǎimíng as the African mother is one of two problematic characters. The arrival of the boss’s soon-to-be brother-in-law renders this skit more culturally offensive. The brother-in-law arrives from the airport via what he calls an “African bike.” The brother is not referring to the two-wheeled method of transportation, but instead to a yellow giraffe with a QR (Quick Response) code around its neck. This “joke” about African bikes is meant for Chinese audiences who are familiar with the bike-sharing companies in China, namely the yellow *ofo* bikes (see figure 5). But because this skit is taking place in Africa, the skit attempts to make the joke that Africans travel by animal instead of by bike or bus or car.



Figure 5: The “African Bike” (left) and an *ofo* bike (right). There is only one bicycle between these two photographs. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=siEPxHafx-4&t=415s>)

By the end of the skit, Kerry’s fake relationship with her boss is abandoned and the boss goes on to marry his Chinese bride. Kerry’s mother is not upset with her daughter for wanting to study in China, and the crowd can now go on feeling warm about

the China and Africa “Shar[ing] the Same Joy and Happiness”. Or, like many Chinese and African people, the viewer may walk away from this skit feeling uncomfortable, upset, or embarrassed by China’s problematic portrayal of its relationship with Africa.

Chinese netizens on Weibo expressed such sentiments posting comments disapproving of the skit. However, because of strict censorship of Chinese media, many of the posts criticizing CCTV and the skit have been removed. However, I have found secondary sources that share pre-censored responses.

I think it’s a bit racist (种族歧视). What do our African friends think of this? This is plain racism, the foreign media are going to explode. OMFG anyone watching this racism right now in the gala? (Koetse 2018)

Other Chinese netizens also felt that the racism in the skit was too blatant to be denied and questioned how the same Chinese audience would react if white people were pretending to be Chinese in the same way that Lóu Nǎimíng was pretending to be African. A microblogger by the name Chen Fei Tutu, writes their thoughts about the skit as follows.

The racial discrimination was so clear. Is this our nation propagating Chinese values? When white people discriminate against us, we are strongly dissatisfied, but now we are discriminating against Africans in such high profile. How shameful (SBS 2018).

Another netizen by the name of Tutopia, responded to the skit by writing, “Imagine if it was a white person in blackface saying in an exaggerated accent, ‘I love America,’ and not being blasted by the whole world” (SBS 2018). In contrast to the embarrassed Chinese netizens and angered Africans and Westerns, a CCTV anchor, Yáng Ruì released a video in response to the Gala skit. Yang Rui is a highly visible news anchor and producer for CCTV’s English channel, CCTV-News (China Central Television n.d.).

Since 1988, Yáng Rui (杨锐) has worked for CCTV and is popularly known for his talk show, *Dialogue*, which discusses current events and is CCTV-News' highest rated show.

After the February 16th Gala, Yáng Rui released a video commentary about his analysis of the Gala in response to the debates that are “flar[ing] up about whether a skit of a televised Spring Festival Gala of China’s friendship with Africa [carried] racial overtones” (Weibo 2018). According to Africans and non-Africans alike, “Share the Same Joy and Happiness” did more than carry “racial overtones” as exemplified by the comments above. Yáng elaborates:

[Within Chinese society] we do have racial ignorance, but no racial discrimination or hate, I’m afraid. [...] Racism is based on deep and institutionalized bias against people of color and arose from slavery. The movement of civil liberty and independence of all African countries has put an end to open and visible racial discrimination. White supremacy is over in the age of globalization, but our subtle human bias is harder to get rid of (Weibo 2018).

Based on my and 22 other Black people’s experiences in China, Yáng Rui’s assessment is false. There is both racial discrimination and racial hate within China’s borders. I do not disagree with all of Yang’s statements. Yáng said that CCTV producers “... in China [need] to reflect upon a reckless mistake about the skin color.” Rather than describing the use of blackface as “a reckless mistake”, I would call it a careless mistake. Nonetheless, I do recognize that conversations about race are not commonplace in China, and so perhaps Yáng’s use of “reckless” as opposed to “careless” is appropriate in this context. In the conclusion of the video, Yang Rui ends with the following statement.

Racism is an evil that will never get in the way. China does face an uphill battle for respecting cultural and political diversity in our execution of the [projects]. Are we ready? I’m not sure. Thanks to the televised wake-up call, we need to be very careful to downplay nationalism and to eliminate signs of racism. A human vulnerability and liability in general (Weibo 2018).

China, like the rest of the world is facing an uphill battle when it comes to putting an end to racial inequity, among other inequalities. At the very least, Yáng Rui acknowledges the hypervisibility of how Chinese Gala producers are representing China in relation to other countries, namely Africa, to a wide international audience of Chinese and non-Chinese people alike.

Black Bodies in Chinese Media

Prior to the 2018 Lunar New Year or *Chūnwǎn* (春晚) broadcast, there were many times when Chinese companies have used simplified, shallow, and stereotypically negative images and representations of Black bodies to serve a purpose in their product. These negative images have been called out by Black expatriates living throughout China and also by Western audiences and news outlets. These images were defended by some Chinese citizens, companies, and news agencies as misguided or misunderstood appreciation for African culture. Both Chinese and non-Chinese people argue that Chinese companies should know better and, therefore, do better— and I am more than inclined to agree.

Hierarchies of Nationality, Blackness, and Language

People in China have no problem assigning labels to foreigners, even if the imposition of these labels are tainted with (un)realized prejudice due to ignorance and inherent racism (Mathews 2017; 38-47). While in Beijing, I had a roommate who was white, had blonde hair, and was also American, like myself. One night we went out together and a Chinese woman asked both of us where we were from. When we responded that we were both American, she looked at me and then back at my roommate

with a confused expression on her face. “What?” (“什么?” / “Shénme?”) She then proceeded to ask how both of us, looking the way we did, could possibly be from the same country? This woman seemed to think that I was confused about my own nationality because in the context of China, Black people are always African. The concept that I can be more than one thing, Black and American, is unfamiliar, even when I used Mandarin to explain my nationality. “Yes, I really am a Black American!” (“对啊，我真的是一个黑美国人!” / “*Duì a, wǒ zhēn de shì yīgè hēi měiguó rén!*”) A Black person’s country of origin contributes to how Chinese people interact with them. Nationality can be a form of cultural capital if an individual hails from any western country like the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, etc. Like one’s nationality, language ability can also help or hurt relations between Black foreigners and Chinese nationals.

Because skin color is so closely linked to nationality in the context of China, an individual’s appearance, specifically the color of her skin, is used to designate her nationality (Johnson 2007). Colorism and anti-Blackness are not exclusive to China—it permeates every setting the majority of my informants described. Across the globe, fairer skin is associated with higher socio-economic status and affords such individuals immense privilege. I want to echo Kevin’s sentiments, that “white in every part of the world is just [imagined to be] better. It’s prettier, smarter, more intelligent... sexier.” Contrastingly, darker skin is an indication of how much time an individual spends outdoors working, encoding meanings of poverty, lack of education, and overall low socioeconomic status (Johnson 2007). In Beijing, billboards, magazine covers, and TV commercials commonly feature white women or very fair skinned Chinese women trying

to pass as white women. This preferential treatment extends to all foreigners, but to varying degrees. The ideal foreign group is white people from Europe or America. Black people, specifically Africans, are at the bottom of the ranking.

In China, all foreigners are judged on the color of their skin and their nationality as indicated by the passport they possess. For example, when submitting a CV or resume for a job, it is common in China to include a picture of yourself (the applicant) in addition to your qualifications at the request of the hiring manager. When Kevin tried to change jobs, the Chinese recruiter asked him if he knew any other English teachers interested in the job for which he was applying. Even though Kevin was qualified for the position, the recruiter felt that he “wouldn’t be a good fit” for the school because Kevin did not represent the palatable foreignness the school was looking for. Read: Kevin was foreign, but he was not white and therefore his Black foreignness did not signal modernity in the same way that whiteness does in China and many other parts of the world.

One weekend I visited the Chengde Mountain Resort or Lígōng (離宮), the ancient summer palace getaway for Qing Dynasty emperors. I was verbally assaulted by two Chinese men as I crossed a bridge. They pointed in my direction and snarled, “Why are you so dark?! Why are you so black?!” (“你为什么那么黑?!” / “*Nǐ wèishéme nàme hēi?!?*”) Then, the two men proceeded to roll with laughter when I chose to ignore them. “How can you let them say that to you?” My white friends who understood Mandarin said in horror. Enraged and shocked by such blatant anti-blackness, they told me how I should have responded. In that instance, I wished that I was not able to understand Mandarin. What my white friends did not realize was that if I responded in any way to

defend myself, I would have played into the stereotype of Black people as angry and savage. This to me would have been more shameful than simply walking away.

Importance of Place and Space

After my first trip to China in secondary school, I vowed never to return to a place where I was stared at and photographed without my consent. Clearly, this vow was broken, but the sentiment still remains. One of the main reasons why I did not want to return to China was because I did not want to be a spectacle. In a country that purports to be culturally homogeneous, the Han Chinese ethnicity is seen as the norm and anyone not Han is a foreigner or 外国人 (*Wài guó rén*), which literally translates inoffensively to *person from another country*. Foreigners in China will experience being hypervisible. Only their surface level appearance will be taken into consideration and used to pass judgement by most people in China and around the world.

Instances of unwanted attention are partially dependent on location: rural versus urban, international versus local schools, foreigner districts versus “traditional” old-town areas. Informants who spent time in rural areas felt that instances of being photographed by local Chinese people without consent and pointed or stared at occurred with greater and more pronounced frequency than in bigger cities. In major cities, instances of photography and staring still occur, but are more common at tourist sites within the urban areas. On university campuses, the instances of staring and unwanted attention were markers of that person’s socio-economic status. When I was stared at on university campuses, it was by employees who worked in the dining halls or who worked in Facilities as groundskeepers. Some foreigners feel that the Chinese are rude because of

their blatant staring and feel that this represents a lack of “manners”. Mrs. June, a Black American motivational speaker, wife, and mother to two teenagers, arrived in Beijing after moving with her family from the Middle East. Her husband, Mr. Terry, who is also a Black American, is a physics teacher and likes working for international schools. According to her experiences in Beijing, she feels “Westerners are taught system of manners, but Chinese are just the way they are— there’s less of a Western influence.” In China, foreigners are pointed and stared at, photographed, and touched regardless if they consent or not.

There are areas in Beijing that are frequented and populated by more foreigners than other parts of the city and with a more “Western influence”. These areas include 五道口 (*Wúdàokǒu*) located near a handful of universities and 朝阳区 (*Chāoyáng qū*), an area that houses embassies, consulates, and 三里屯 (*Sānlǐtún*) district that is likened to New York City’s SoHo and is full of foreign bars, restaurants, and shops. In the *Sānlǐtún* district or street 后海胡同 (*Hòuhǎi hùtòng*), it is not uncommon for foreigners to be encouraged to enter and sometimes even offered free admission and refreshments at bars and clubs. Having foreigners in a Chinese establishment can signify high quality as a type of demonstrable cultural capital. White foreigners are eagerly welcomed into Chinese establishments, especially if they are thinner, taller, and have blonde or red hair, as they represent ideal and exoticized beauty standards. In many of the clubs within the *Sānlǐtún* district, many of the bartenders, hosts, and dancers are white foreigners, specifically white foreigners from Russia.

Even digital and public spaces are sites of uncomfortable interactions for Black foreigners as they engage with their Chinese counterparts. In 2016, a commercial released

by a Chinese laundry detergent producer, Qiaobi, featured a Black man who is thrown into a laundry machine by a Chinese woman, washed with the detergent and emerges as a white, Chinese man wearing the same outfit as the Black man (Folley 2016). As the clean Chinese man emerges, the Chinese woman is extremely pleased (see figure 6). The commercial is a near facsimile of an Italian television ad released in 2009 that was equally problematic for using the phrase “Coloured is better” as a marketing phrase. This is one of many examples of ignorant prejudice within Chinese digital spaces that makes life for Black expatriates uncomfortable in China. Barry Sautman, a professor with the Division of Social Science at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, suggests that this ad exemplifies a lower degree of sensitivity to issues of racism than Western audiences would tolerate. Sautman also supports reality of racism in China (BBC China 2016).



Figure 6: Screenshots of Qiaobi Laundry Commercial
(<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/racist-chinese-laundry-commercial-sparks-outrage-n581636>)

Nearly ten years later in October of 2017, WeChat was criticized for translating a phrase for ‘black foreigner’ as *nigger* (Beale 2017). A spokesperson from WeChat explained that when the words for *Black person* are used in conjunction with other words

with negative connotations the software uses *nigger* in its translation. Another example of ignorant prejudice within public spaces was a photography exhibit in Wuhan, China, that features a photo of an African animal paired with a portrait of an African person as if to compare the “similar” facial expressions (see figures 7 and 8). After receiving countless complaints of racism by the Black communities in Wuhan, the Hubei Provincial Museum pulled the exhibit of photographer Yu Huiping’s work. Yu is the vice chairman of the Hubei Photographers Association and an award winning photographer who has made more than 20 trips to the African continent. However, it was not his idea to juxtapose African animals and people. This brilliantly problematic idea was the brainchild of curator Wang Yuejun who justified his decision saying “many Chinese people relate their animal familiars assigned by the Chinese zodiac and ‘in Chinese proverbs, animals are always used for admiration and complement’” (Goldman and Wu 2017).



Figure 7 (left): Yu Huiping’s photographs juxtaposing African people with African animals (<http://www.haijiangzx.com/2017/1013/1928771.shtml>)

Figure 8 (right): Another one of Yu Huiping’s “This is Africa” photographs (<http://www.haijiangzx.com/2017/1013/1928771.shtml>)

Dealing with Hypervisibility and Different Manners

For many expats, arriving in China is a shock because of the differences in mannerisms that are deemed socially acceptable and respectable. In China, compared to the West, it is common for people to stand or sit very close to each other, especially on trains or while in line. Older women have elbowed me out of the way as I board the train to make room for themselves or their grandchildren. Traveling on the train was also when I felt stared at the most, only secondary to being in tourist destinations. Black friends of mine living in Beijing told me countless stories of Chinese people staring and not-so-discreetly photographing them while on the train and even mistaking them for celebrities (with whom they shared no likeness). One friend, Kevin, an English teacher from the United States, sent me a WeChat message with a screenshot of a Chinese man's photo of him taken on the stranger's tablet (see figure 9).



Figure 9: A photograph of a Chinese man taking a picture of one of my informants on the subway with his smartphone.

Unfortunately for Black expats traveling to and living in China, it is also not uncommon for Chinese people to try and touch a Black person's hair without first asking permission. Victoria's mother and aunt visited her from America when she first came to China, a year ago and they received quite the reception while in Beijing.

So it's just different and then all of my family members are Black, about coffee colored skin or darker, gray hair, and like, Black is one thing already, the gray hair just threw them [the Chinese] off. My mom had locs at that time, so did my aunt, it was all the staring, the pointing the pictures, the sly pictures, the not-so-sly pictures. But, they [my mom and aunt] still had a really great time.

When a Chinese person touches Victoria's hair, she has what I found to be a rather ingenious way of addressing these inappropriate actions. As Victoria goes about her day in Beijing, occasionally there are Chinese people who feel the need to touch her hair, which she tends to wear in various styles from an afro to braids, to twists. Because it's less common for Chinese people to ask before they touch her hair, she decides to be reactive as opposed to preventative. "*Oh, how strange!*" ("哦，那么奇怪啊！"/"*Ó, nàme qíguài a!*") This is what Chinese people have said to Victoria as they impart their fascination with her hair. In response Victoria takes their hair in her hands and reacts in a similar manner by asking, "*Oh, why is your hair so straight? Does it just lie there like that?*" ("哦，你的头发为什么这么直呢？它只是躺在那里吗？"/"*Ó, nǐ de tóufǎ wèishéme zhème zhí ne? Tā zhǐshì tǎng zài nàlǐ ma?*"). This usually leaves her Chinese counterparts rather confused and slightly uncomfortable, which is Victoria's intent. In other instances, I was also told stories of Black foreigners who were not bothered by Chinese onlookers and embraced the attention they received. Rather than getting upset, some foreigners, Black or White, will happily take photographs and practice English (or another Western language) with any Chinese person who is interested. I also learned that

one of the best times to travel in China is during the winter when everyone has on a coat and is wrapped up in their scarves. Everyone looks the same in a coat and so I was able to traverse the streets of Beijing in an “incog-negro” fashion¹⁵, thereby masking my foreignness.

It's not just Black and White...

In interacting with their Chinese counterparts, Black expatriates are often faced with the task of having to dispel negative stereotypes and images of Black bodies that pervade Chinese society. Mr. Terry from the United States takes this task very seriously as a “Champion of Righteousness” who shows truth through action— the truth that Black people are civilized, educated, and worthy of being treated like respectable people.

Black expatriates’ relationships with Chinese people depend on place, cultural competency, and the ability of both parties to communicate with each other. This is why many of my informants strongly advocated that anyone moving to China should learn Mandarin and through learning the language they can also learn about Chinese culture. Mr. Terry also felt that “well-traveled Asians” have better impressions of “Black folks” because they have actually engaged with Black people. I agree that exposure influences how Chinese people feel about Black bodies. My Chinese professors were accustomed to dealing with American students and to some extent, Black American students as well— even though some guidance on my part was necessary. I had various conversations with my professors to describe that my hair grew out of my head with more kinks and curls than I could count and that I palm-roll it in order to create my locs, which I could then

¹⁵ The photograph on the title page of this ethnography is an example of “incog-negro” fashion.

style in braids or twists or buns as I so chose. These conversations were challenging, yet rewarding and helped both parties find common ground through concentrated efforts. The majority of my informants, myself included, felt that they played a part in helping to “change the philosophy of Chinese mindsets about Africa” and by extension, Black bodies. One way that Black expatriates try to do this is through intercultural exchanges such as, sharing food, hosting fashion shows and discussions pertaining to specific aspects of African and Black culture, and by living their lives in China as they interact with Chinese people on a daily basis.

Reciprocated Cultural Exchange and Bilateral People-to-People Relationships

There are attempts on both sides, that of the Chinese and Black nationals from Africa and the Caribbean, to understand the other’s culture reciprocally. Embassies and consulates are specific sites for cultural exchange between people from various countries and the Chinese. As more and more countries begin to have a diplomatic presence in Beijing, there are more opportunities for the formation of bilateral relationships between China and other foreign countries. Moreover, every year a new group of students from African countries arrives in China, specifically in Beijing to study for their Masters degrees or their PhDs. For these students, the consulate and embassies of their home countries are a site for support and gathering of one’s countrymen. The celebration of National Holidays, Bilateral Relations Day, and annually hosted student conferences provide opportunities for cultural exchange between the home countries of foreigners and the Chinese. In an effort to foster mutual understanding between China and African countries, embassies and consulates host cultural events open to not only their diplomats, but to Chinese nationals as well. For example, embassies of African countries are starting

to celebrate Chinese national holidays like the New Year Spring Festival and the Mid-Autumn Festival, in addition to the Independence Days of their home country.

Furthermore, universities with student organizations and clubs founded on the basis of specific cultural identities, also host events that allow other cultures to be exchanged with Chinese culture. The university that Daisy and Marsha attend in Beijing has an annual cultural expo that allows international students, like them, to wear their nation's colors and decorate booths with food, clothing, and information about their home countries. This cultural expo is another way in which intercultural exchange is promoted between Black foreigners and the local Chinese population.

Some students and even foreigners with Chinese friends will participate in homestays, where they spend time with a Chinese family. Homestays provide an opportunity for foreigners to learn more about Chinese family culture as well as an opportunity for Chinese families to learn more about the foreigner visiting their home. I have been told stories of my friends visiting Chinese homes and being astonished at the types of food being served, specifically cooked chicken feet, and how they struggled to communicate with and understand the colloquialisms and speech patterns of their Chinese hosts. Oftentimes, if there was a younger child in the family, they would serve as a translator between the visiting foreigner and the rest of the family.

Sondra is an African woman with experience working in the foreign service sector while completing her fifth year on assignment in Beijing. Sondra explained to me that even though she is a representative of her country and working in China, she does not look only at the politically beneficial opportunities, but values the time needed to build personal, people to people, relationships as well. These people to people connections will

also work to strengthen the overall bilateral relationships between her country and China. Through “Cultural Ambassador” programs and initiatives and the Trade and Cultural Attachés, African countries can market positive and appropriate images of their nations to the Chinese by creating “people to people relationships” by hosting African dance classes, fashion shows featuring African and Chinese designs, and overall exchanging of culture. Another aspect of efforts to strengthen bilateral connections is through reciprocated language learning where African nationals learn Mandarin, and Chinese are taught the many languages on the African continent in classes led by language teachers from the respective linguistic backgrounds. These opportunities for intercultural exchange can help strengthen diplomatic ties between China and African countries and are hosted by various groups from Embassy officials to university students to third parties that host opportunities for intercultural exchange based on interest garnered from online ad postings on websites like The Beijinger or within WeChat groups.

The increased diplomatic presence of African and Caribbean countries in Beijing also offers a chance for representatives of these countries to encourage Chinese foreign service officials to visit, thus continuing the intercultural exchange not only in China, but abroad as well. Sondra shared stories of her hosting Chinese nationals in her home country and exposing them to the food, culture, and tourist attractions that her home had to offer, all to the pleasure of the Chinese. These visits to African and Caribbean countries are extended to Chinese foreign service agents as well as potential Chinese investors.

Language

Like nationality and skin color, language ability can also help or hinder relations between Black foreigners and Chinese nationals. One of the biggest factors that changes how Black foreigners and Chinese people interact, for better or for worse, is language. Most of my informants named the importance of learning Mandarin and understanding Chinese culture as a way to better adjust to life in Beijing. Stacy, an American convert to Islam living in Beijing as a permanent resident with an African husband, believes that anyone living in China *must* learn Mandarin. Through learning Mandarin, foreigners can learn more about China as a whole. Although it is virtually impossible for anyone who is not already Chinese to be considered Chinese, foreigners who take the time to learn Mandarin do have wider access and mobility than foreigners who do not. However, there were Black expats who had been living in Beijing for anywhere from a couple of months to a couple of years who only spoke “survival Chinese” at best. “Survival Chinese” is what some foreigners refer to as the basics that they need to know in order to get around and *survive* in China. This includes ways to communicate with taxi drivers about where they need to go, how to ask where the bathroom is, and other quotidian aspects of life. In order to communicate more complex requests and ideas, these foreigners who only know “survival Chinese” must rely on others in their social circles who have better command of Mandarin and navigating within Chinese society. Although Mandarin language abilities are useful, it is much more surprising to local Chinese people if anyone not Chinese is able to speak and understand Mandarin. There were multiple occasions in Beijing where I would surprise Chinese passersby when I opened my mouth and spoke Mandarin to ask

questions or to respond to false presumptions of my nationality as African as opposed to American.

An example of someone with “survival Chinese” is Tony, a consultant who at the time of the interview had lived in Beijing for five years for a work contract. Having grown up in South America, studied in Europe, and completed a PhD in China, Tony has a “talent for languages” and is accustomed to and comfortable with traveling and living abroad. “Beijing is fine” was Tony’s response when I asked how he liked living in the city. He speaks “just enough” Mandarin for socializing and forced himself to change mindsets and adjust to life in China by consciously trying to make more Chinese friends. Because of his passion for music, Tony found out about jam sessions with other local and foreign musicians who get together and play music. Eventually this led to Tony and some of his friends creating a band to play at venues throughout Beijing.

Alternatively, for some foreigners language acquisition takes more time than they would like and proves to be a bit more challenging. For Mrs. June, the move to China from the U.S. was a jarring one as she was pushed completely out of her comfort zone physically, culturally, and linguistically. She relies on the help of her two teenagers, who speak some Mandarin, to navigate Beijing. Mrs. June’s children have picked up Mandarin faster than she has and they have tried, to no avail, to teach their mother Mandarin.

However, being able to understand the language has its advantages and disadvantages. I spent one day in Tianjin, a city just south of Beijing and about 30 minutes away by high speed rail, to visit the Porcelain House, amongst other sites. While in the courtyard, I caught the conversation of two older Chinese women behind me who

were trying to figure out if my head was being covered by a hat or by hair. In an effort to put their debate to rest and get rid of the unwanted attention my presence had garnered, I turned around and responded that what was on my head was, in fact, my hair and not a hat. They looked at me in shock that I could speak Mandarin and then asked me if I was sure that what was on my head was really hair and how I was able to put my hair in the style that it was in. This interaction was relatively harmless in comparison to others that turned my ability to understand Mandarin into a disadvantage, like the incident of harassment at the Chengde Mountain Resort.

In short, language is a double-edged sword. Foreigners who can speak Mandarin have a wider range of mobility in China because they can communicate with other Mandarin-speakers. Mrs. June said, “I wish I spoke Chinese so that I could hear what they think or how they think or how they perceive the world.” Contrastingly, understanding another language can leave you exposed to instances of insult and harm like the incident in Chengde. Ultimately, understanding Mandarin allows foreigners to counter stereotypes and misconceptions about themselves and to also learn dispel their own stereotypes and misconceptions about Chinese people and Chinese culture. In the moments where I was able to speak against stereotypes, I am reminded of Nelson Mandela’s quote about communicating across language barriers, “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.”

Black People's Perceptions of the Chinese

Black people's perception of and relationship with China and Chinese people is dependent on the individual's background. Black foreigners often expressed surprise at hearing Chinese people, men in particular, hocking up phlegm and spitting it out wherever they are. The practice of sneezing into one's arm is another American habit that Chinese people do not practice. Other Black expats also cited differences between their own and Chinese perceptions of cleanliness, which is based on what they were accustomed to prior to living in China. When Mrs. June and her family first arrived in Beijing, she described her surprise at different mannerisms in China.

Westerners, at least the ones that I talk to, we tend to think that we innately have more manners or are more clean or whatever— no, we were taught this system. [...] I have this double thing that happens. I think it's kinda fly to be in a culture that hasn't been totally mindset into someone else's way of thinking. And that way it's kinda cool like, they [the Chinese] are who they are cause that's who they are. But in the other ways it's like, really? You just gonna hock up spit right there? This the subway, not the ground, you just gonna spit right there? Or you in the grocery store, you just gonna hock up like that? You just gonna let that go? [...] Those are the things: getting used to seeing children squat to use the bathroom— anywhere, just anywhere. [...] I think it's cool my children get to grow up with this experience. They'll never see the world the way I saw it, and I like that. And hopefully that means they won't carry a lot of the things I carried growing up.

Interactions between Black people and Chinese people are also dependent on a Black person's individual understanding of race, ethnicity, and thereby racism and Afro-phobia. Some Black foreigners too easily dismiss negative or uncomfortable interactions with Chinese people because for them “not everything is about race” but rather about a lack of exposure as well as naiveté on the part of the Black foreigner. My conversation with Tony was interesting to say the least because of our different perceptions of the role of

race in how our Black bodies move through Chinese society. During our conversation, I asked Tony about any negative experiences he may have had while living in Beijing.

Well yeah. Something... ok in the beginning when I came [and] I couldn't speak any Chinese so I had difficulty taking a cab and you couldn't call Uber because you can't tell the driver where you wanna go. And even if I knew the way, I didn't know how to say 'left', 'right', or 'straight'. And so, in the supermarket and even at the bank, like these were the difficulties I had, so it was just a language problem. Yeah, other than that I didn't have any other issues.

In other interviews with Black foreigners this is typically when instances of microaggressions are brought to light. But for Tony, his primary challenge living in Beijing was his inability to speak Mandarin. Alternatively, other Black foreigners have jobs that require that them to develop working relationships with Chinese people and so they have found ways to negotiate cultural differences through learning Mandarin as a way to learn more about Chinese culture. And finally, some of the Black foreigners I spoke to were very much attuned to the racially-charged actions, stereotypes and undertones in their interactions with Chinese people.

Mr. Terry is an American physics teacher who enjoys teaching in secondary schools where he receives benefits from his employer that not only aids him in his career, but has positive outcomes his family as well. The benefits package he receives as a teacher at an international school includes: a salary (paid in USD), a housing allowance, airline travel, health insurance, tuition coverage for his two children, a bonus, retirement plan, and a flexible bonus spending account amongst other perks. Beijing is the second location that he has taught in after leaving the United States a couple of years ago. Mr. Terry identified high points and low points of living in Beijing and interacting with Chinese people, typically parents of school children, as a Black, male teacher. During our conversation in a coffee shop one afternoon, Mr. Terry told me that he occasionally meets

“well-traveled Asians” who have a more nuanced understanding of Black people because they’ve had the privilege to visit other parts of the world. However, more often, Mr. Terry has encountered more people around the world that have “negative views of Black folks” because of “misinformation” and a “poisoning of the mind” from images spread through the media. Mr. Terry’s reflections were similar to my other informants who were also Black. An obvious challenge when living in China is learning Mandarin, as previously discussed. Secondly, there is the challenge and low point of countering the “negative views of Black folks”, especially pertaining to the “unrealized prejudices of older Asian generations.” In contrast to the older generations are “well-traveled Asians with better impressions of Black folks.” One of the contributing factors to China’s ignorance of foreigners collectively, is that the country was closed off to the rest of the world during imperial times and was forcibly opened to the Euro-American world after the Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860) and treaties that followed which eventually led to the end of dynastic rule in China (Lan 2016:302). Then, from the 1970s to 1990s, Deng Xiaoping’s Open Door Policy made China accessible to investment from foreign businesses (Lam 2016: 304).

Deng Xiaoping’s policies dismantled China’s economic isolation and helped to establish China’s economic connection to the rest of the world. However, a feeling of social isolationism is still evident today to a certain extent due to heavy censorship by the government. Therefore, Chinese people who have the means to travel are able to do the work themselves of learning more about other people and cultures, as opposed to existing in a limited mindset had they not spent time abroad. As a working man in China, Mr. Terry expressed a sentiment echoed in other conversation with Black male informants:

the fact that many Chinese-led institutions are looking for white faces without any credentials to fill open positions. Kevin experienced a situation that exemplifies Mr. Terry's statement entirely, whereby he was denied a job because he was Black, even though he had all of the qualifications. Even in the thick of racial discomfort, Mr. Terry does not tolerate racial slurs from anyone, Black, White or otherwise. I remember Mr. Terry as the "Champion of Righteousness", as he sought to "show truth through action," especially when it comes to countering stereotypes about Black people, specifically Black men. For this reason he makes sure to always show the "face of [an] intelligent Black man" by acting in a respectful, patient, and humble manner with everyone he interacts with. Mr. Terry takes the time to build relationships with his students and their parents, Chinese and non-Chinese alike, who are willing to open themselves to experiencing the reality of interacting with a Black American man as opposed to holding onto stereotypes and prejudice.

Misconceptions on All Sides

I previously mentioned the potential usefulness of using travel guides created by Black travelers as one way to help Black people transition to their lives in China. The blogs of Black people who have spent time in China include stories of people who enjoyed being photographed and stared at, but also stories of individuals who hated every minute of the unwanted attention their presence attracted. Some of the Black travelers who felt less bothered by being photographed and stared at rationalized that the Chinese people they interacted with were coming from a place of genuine naiveté and innocence. Alternatively, some Black travelers understand that anti-Blackness is a global phenomenon, and so the unwanted attention they receive in China is just part and parcel

of being visually identified as Black. In a country with purported homogeneity, I was rather surprised that if I was with a group of Black people, Chinese people would oftentimes ask if we were related or think that we all looked alike. On my study abroad program there were only two other Black women on the trip, not including myself. As we were boarding the bus to visit the Capital Museum, a Chinese girl began talking to me as if she was resuming a previous conversation. When I told her my name, she looked rather confused and then turned to scan the rest of the bus. To her, and my surprise, she had confused me with one of the other Black girls on the trip— who, unsurprisingly, looks *nothing* like me.

The reality is that interactions between Black people and Chinese people do not only go one way; there is a mutual exchange of stereotypes which hopefully are dismissed as false ideas once true cultural interchange takes place. As mentioned in the second chapter, the Black expats that I met in Beijing come from a variety of backgrounds and thus had varied preconceived notions of China as a whole as influenced by their families and the media. To foreigners, China is often stereotyped as a country where people eat dogs and cats; as a place where the people are rude and dirty; as a place where you can get cheap, counterfeited luxury items; as a place where everyone looks the same; and as place a where people only eat rice.

But this does not mean that all foreigners are faultless victims. For example, since the 1990s, the popular American rap group “The Wu Tang Clan” have appropriated Chinese culture for decades— and so has everyone who enjoys their music for that matter, not to mention the poorly lip-dubbed and overly-hyped kungfu movies that my

father was a fan of when I was growing up. There is work to be done on all sides to do away with biased understandings of anyone who is not considered to be the “norm”.

Imagining Foreigners

What does it mean for someone to be a foreigner in China? Is it how they look? Is it the language they do or don't speak? Is it sufficient to say that they were born outside of China? This question is easiest to answer through translation. In Mandarin Chinese, there are various ways to translate the English word for *foreigner*. More specifically, the concept of a *foreigner* in Chinese society is based on a person not having any cultural or national relations to China. 中国 (*Zhōngguó*) means *Middle Kingdom* and also translates to *China*, the name of the country in English. Due to the pre-modern understanding that China was the center of the world, Chinese people, 中国人 (*Zhōngguó rén*) are people from the Middle Kingdom. Alternatively, terms for foreigners refer to people from *outside* countries. An older term, 老外 (*Lǎowài*) means *foreigner*, as in someone from another country that is not China, as does the more popularly used term 外国人 (*Wàiguó rén*), which literally means “outside nation person”. Those are both terms that refers to anyone who is not Chinese. The terms 洋鬼子, 白人, 黑人 (*yángguǐzi, hēirén, báirén*) are terms that reference specific kinds of foreigners. 鬼子 (*guǐzi*) means “devil” and a derogatory slang term that has been applied to the Japanese, Americans, and Koreans at various points in Chinese history, notably during the Japanese occupation of China during the Second Sino-Japanese War, the Boxer Rebellion, and general unsettlement and dissatisfaction with other countries. Lastly, the terms 黑人 (*hēirén*) and 白人 (*báirén*) mean *black person* and *white person*, respectively.

In this chapter, I described how Black expatriates do and do not engage interpersonally with their Chinese counterparts and other Black foreigners in Beijing. These interactions are determined by the Black individual's awareness of self and how they are seen by others, namely Chinese people and other Black people. The interactions I described in this chapter are framed by how aware people are of the ways in which they are disrupting or following the status quo of a society that is built on the understanding that some people have more power because of the meanings associated with their phenotype. Moreover, I discussed how Black people have been problematically portrayed in Chinese media and how these portrayals convey how social hierarchies are created in China on the basis of nationality, skin color, and language. While the majority of this ethnography is about how Black expatriates are frequently misunderstood and "othered" by Chinese people in Beijing, I also acknowledge that Black people are guilty of misunderstanding their Chinese counterparts as well. Therefore, there is work to be done on both side to improve mutual awareness of the *other*.

This work is taking place in Beijing by both Chinese and Black actors. In April of 2018, several of my informants shared a photograph of a praiseworthy Apple advertisement featuring a Black woman with a large afro for the new iPhone X (see figure 10). This advertisement is evidence there are people who consider Black people, not as subaltern, but as people who are present and contributing to the social fabric of Beijing, in addition to the native Chinese population. Interesting still, the advertisement uses a Black woman to sell the iPhone X with Chinese characters in the subtitle. My guess is that Mandarin may be the only common language that Black and Chinese people share in Beijing and while the main audience for Apple advertisements in China are

Chinese people, Apple’s marketing team would be foolish in not maximizing their market potential by marketing to the growing Black populations within China.



Figure 10: Photograph from an Informant of an Apple iPhone X advertisement with a Black woman

The presence of this Black woman in an ad in Beijing shows that there is hope for changing the imagined meaning of the phenotypically Black body in China and around the world. This advertisement shows how Black people are deterritorializing the understanding of China as a culturally homogenous country by the presence of Black people within the country’s borders. The growing Black communities across China will continue to occupy space, thereby contributing to the “cultural heterogenization” of Chinese society. However, true “cultural heterogenization” cannot occur if all of the diverse peoples in China are not engaging in some form of intercultural exchange and developing a “double consciousness” that is not based on stereotypically colonized understandings of the “other”.

Chapter V: So How Do They Do It?

How I survive personally, I think I'm pretty open. And... have the idea or the mindset, not that some stuff does not bother me, like you know, the spitting and the booger picking and the hacking and the snot throwing, and you know all of that. But I didn't come here to live in America. Like I came to be in China and all that that entails. And I think a lot of times, people don't realize [this]! Or not realize that, they wanna be, they wanna live here with all the comforts of home. And it's like, I get it but, no. Experience it for what it is. And that's what I try to do. As long as I have a support system when I have those frustrations [...]. And I need to have somebody I can vent to. And I think it's important that I had somebody that had been through that and understands. Because I can vent to my family all the time, all day long, but they never been here. They don't know what the hell— they don't get it, you know what I'm saying? So as long as I have some people that I can vent to who understand, I'm all good. And I didn't have that first time around. And I have that now.

Tina from the U.S. was in the middle of her second stay in China and had been there for five years off and on, when I interviewed her. Her first time in China was rough, but this second time (after the finalization of her divorce) was appearing to be more positive than the last. During our conversation, Tina spoke of the difficulties of adjusting to different culturally acceptable behaviours, living outside of her comfort zone, and the importance of having a community that understands what it's like to live in China not only as a foreigner, but as a Black person, and as a woman. And even after five years of adjustment, Tina, like many of my informants, face the challenges that come with living in a foreign place with enough poise and grace. And eventually, they are able to discover aspects that they enjoy about their life in East Asia.

I love the Chinese culture, minus out all the other shit that I don't like. I love the food! I like the people. I mean, I don't know, like... I'm back for a second time around, you know what I'm saying. China's the place that I've lived the longest. [...] I like it. And to be fair, I do have a good lifestyle here at the school that I'm at, but... I think I've, like I said, I've outgrown it. And I want more of a challenge.

But like many expatriates, Tina does not plan on staying in China forever. Even though her next destination is currently a mystery, the adaptive skills that she's learned living in China as a Black woman will help Tina adjust wherever she goes next.

So I don't know where I'm going. I don't know where I'll land. But I'm ok with not knowing. [...] I know I'll be fine wherever it is I go or I land. And I'm at peace with that. [...] God got me. Or whoever the hell. Not that I'm not gonna plan! Not that I'm not gonna get things in order, but, I'm not like [fake sobbing] "I don't know what's gonna happen." I'll be fine. And... yeah. Whether I'll be here in China or another country, or back home, I'll eventually find myself back out into the world. Cause there's just so much to see. So many people to meet, so many things to do, so much to explore. Yeah. And like my goal is to get more people of color out.

Throughout this ethnography I recount the narratives of Black expatriates living in Beijing, China, and how Black foreigners cope with and navigate feelings of cultural isolation and dislocation that they experience. Furthermore, I explained how Chinese actors create hierarchies of bodies by using the body's appearance as an indicator of gender, wealth, nationality, and (dis)alignment with the ideal types of either Chineseness or Whiteness. To contextualize how this is done, I discussed the modalities of Black expatriates' lives in China, the communities they are a part of, and how they engage with other foreigners and their Chinese counterparts. I have explained the reality of my informants' lives in order to articulate how Black bodies are assigned meaning through the Chinese gaze and how Black people do (and do not) navigate the varied landscapes they traverse while living in China. All foreigners moving to China have to find a place to live, try to learn Mandarin, let their loved ones back home know they're safe, and learn how to navigate the city. But Black foreigners are faced with the specific challenges of dealing with anti-Blackness and Afro-phobia when it comes to finding jobs, performing well in academic and professional settings, and negotiating the fair treatment they deserve but are not always afforded.

And Why Does This Matter?

So why does anything that I've written in the five chapters matter? Why should anyone care about how Black people are treated in China?

China will continue growing and becoming a larger player in the global economic landscape. In doing so, China is already becoming a favorable destination for Africans looking for opportunities for professional or educational advancement, in the form of a newly realized Chinese-Dream¹⁶. Therefore, it is critical for not only scholars, but also governments, and potential migrants to China to understand how Black bodies are conceptualized and interpreted through the Chinese gaze.

Moreover, one “reason to care” is for the sake of economic relationship between China and African countries. China's increased investment in the African continent correlates with an increased desire for bilateral diplomatic and political relations between African countries and China. From 2001-2010 there was a 28% increase in trade between China and Africa. Moreover, China is currently the African continent's largest trading partner (Lan 2016: 304; Songwe et al. 2010: 3). As a result, there is a heightened frequency of African students and professionals moving to China on scholarships and work contracts. This movement is becoming a more “typical” and common phenomenon of globalization in the production of South-South migration as opposed to “traditional” North-South migration patterns. Therefore, a study of how members of the Black diaspora¹⁷ adapt to life in China is not only timely and relevant, but critically necessary to

¹⁶ The Chinese-Dream is similar in nature to the ‘American-Dream’, just that individuals can find (economic prosperity and) success in China as opposed to the United States (Feng 2015).

¹⁷ I use the term *Black diaspora* to reference any person with historical roots in the African continent, namely people of Afro/African descent.

challenging harmful Chinese understandings of Black bodies framed around negative stereotypes as opposed to positive and nuanced realities.

Furthermore, this newly invigorated relationship between China and African countries gives rise to questions about China's true intentions. Is China Africa's "partner, competitor or colonizer?" (Alden 2007: 5). In an effort to keep the African continent's agency intact, African countries should take an active role in creating relationships with China as opposed to China deciding the terms and conditions of these relationships (Songwe et al. 2012: 4). Moreover, China's relationships with African countries have little chance of evolving beyond economic reciprocity without more intentional steps towards cultural literacy—in addition to avoiding negative attention from Western powers.

Equally, and more importantly from my perspective, is the reality of racism in China. For many, Chinese, African, or otherwise, the establishment of FOCAC supports the myth that racism is a non-issue in China. In 2015, although China proposed to offer "2,000 degree education opportunities and 30,000 government scholarships to African countries" in an effort to support agreements made during the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) meeting sessions, the lived experiences of Black expatriates in China demonstrated a discrepancy between the Chinese public opinion of Black bodies and "positive" actions of the Chinese government (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation 2015) (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation 2016). This discrepancy and discontinuity between the Chinese government and ordinary Chinese people leaves room for problematic ideas of Africans that negate any intention for mutual benefits between China and African countries through FOCAC. Although the degree of mental and

physical harm varies, ultimately, many Black expatriates living in China face instances of anti-Blackness on a daily basis.

However, the lived experiences of the Black expatriates whom I interviewed present a counternarrative that racism, specifically anti-Blackness, does permeate various facets of Chinese society, from work environments to apartment-hunting— despite the aspirations of FOCAC that solely focuses on the economic relationships between China and African countries and not necessarily about combating racism¹⁸. This ethnography has detailed the ways that Black people adapt to living in China, which is usually an unfamiliar cultural setting, and how they simultaneously have to navigate the various meanings imposed on their bodies by Chinese society. Black people will continue migrating to China for reasons that are intermingled with both economic politics because of how their bodies are (mis)understood and also for their own personal reasons. Ultimately, I believe that Black people, like all people, should be treated with respect for their humanity regardless of the country or city in which they find themselves.

¹⁸ Realistically, combating racism and anti-Blackness should be a priority in all institutions, and not simply for the sake of economic partnerships.

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