



“AFRICAN SONG AND DANCE” IN CHINA: BETWEEN BLACKFACE MOCKERY AND AFRO-ASIAN SOLIDARITY

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OBSERVATIONS

A short paper series presenting first observations on fascinating yet under-explored developments in science and society in China and beyond. The articles reflect ongoing studies by scholars and guests of the Lise Meitner Research Group “China in the Global System of Science” at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science.

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On February 11, 2021, the eve of the Lunar New Year, an estimated 800 million viewers tuned in to watch the annual Spring Festival Gala (春晚) aired on CCTV, the People's Republic of China's (PRC) leading state broadcaster. Only five minutes into the hours-long show, a dance troupe appeared on stage beating drums, dancing, and singing in Lingala. The performers were Chinese, but they were dressed in clothing meant to resemble traditional Congolese garb, and their skin was painted black.

The performance, entitled “African Song and Dance” (非洲歌舞), attracted outrage from critical commentators, many of whom compared it to a skit from the 2018 CCTV Gala and other recent incidents of anti-Black racism in China. These critics lamented the “willful ignorance” and lack of “racial sensitivity” of Chinese state authorities, arguing that blackface is unequivocally harmful to African and African-descended people around the world.

While such criticisms invoke a discourse of global anti-racism, they neglect the particular history of Chinese engagements with Africa that may have given the performance a different meaning for Chinese organizers and audience members. Displayed alongside performances representing Egypt, Argentina, and Russia, all of which included stereotypical costuming, the dance was intended to celebrate global connectivity along the Chinese-initiated Belt and Road, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has defended it as “[a sign of respect](#).”

This short paper will analyze some of the responses generated by this year’s CCTV blackface scandal, to try to unravel the complications of thinking about racism, Blackness, and Chinese ideas of Africa today. In such situations, Chinese scholars, especially those with expertise in African Studies, take up crucial translational roles, moving cautiously between global critiques of racism and particularist explanations of past Chinese engagements with Africa. Their interventions point to the need for more careful interpretation of how the contemporary Chinese state appropriates Mao-era performances of Afro-Asian solidarity.

Response 1: Condemnation

Many observers immediately responded to the “African Song and Dance” performance with shocked condemnation. One white South African [analyst](#) of China-Africa relations vividly illustrated his dismay at seeing a repetition of the 2018 fiasco, “when dancers in Lion King-style fauxfrican garb were joined by a Chinese actress in blackface and butt pads.” Despite the “immediate firestorm of controversy” following that event, he wrote:

“Here we are—2021 and the dancers are back! Ethnically Chinese one and all, but in brown pancake makeup, feathers, and banging those bongos. The grotesquery defies description. The combination of open unambiguous racism with manic jollity has a peculiarly desolating effect. After watching it, I wanted to take two Xanax and cry...”

Today, in the United States, South Africa, and many other white-dominated or formerly colonized societies, the use of makeup to mimic racial features of non-white people would readily

bring to mind antiquated and taboo practices from an ugly racist past. In [Exporting Jim Crow](#), a study of blackface minstrelsy as a global export from the United States to South Africa and beyond, Chinua Thelwell describes how in the nineteenth century, white actors known as “minstrels” darkened their faces with burnt corks, producing grotesquely exaggerated masks with which they mocked and denigrated Black people. Such performances, wildly popular among whites in the American South and colonial South Africa, propagated racial slurs and reinforced narratives that equated national identity with whiteness.

Were the Chinese dancers performing “African Song and Dance” guilty of disseminating similarly derogatory images? Many critics seem to have thought so. In a China-based online forum aimed at scholars of China-Africa relations, a short-lived discussion of the performance ensued after one member shared an article from WeChat. The article accused the Lunar New Year gala of having “[put] blackface onstage once again,” and described the performance as “[sparking] debate and criticism online.” A few hours later, a Chinese researcher of East Africa responded—I paraphrase—by suggesting that “blackface” (placed within quotation marks) might occur within a different context in China, and that it may lack the colonial baggage it would have in the West. Interpretation of such an event as the CCTV gala, the scholar went on vaguely, can be complicated and lead to controversy, as it depends heavily on the varied assumptions and background knowledge of different viewers. He then posted a link to the Chinese-language [Wikipedia](#) page of the Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble. Another Chinese scholar followed up with a link to a Chinese-language [interview](#) with lead singer Zhu Mingying.

The discussion quickly veered into another direction, as one particularly vocal non-Chinese commentator left a series of comments about the offensiveness of blackface in general and especially the 2018 skit, from two years prior, to “Africans.” Although one of the Chinese scholars suggested there could be a difference between the earlier skit and this year’s, her comment appeared to be washed away in the sea of condemnation. This perhaps reflects a pattern in commentary about race and racism in China. Non-Chinese observers tend to swiftly denounce anything that

looks like forms of anti-Black racism, such as blackface minstrelsy, known in the West to have been harmful and whose memory is painful, especially for Black-identified people. Chinese voices that express anything less than condemnation are usually dismissed as puppetry of the state. The history that the two Chinese scholars quietly gestured towards, however, would indicate that certain artistic performances utilizing dark face and body paint might evoke different memories in the context of the PRC.

Response 2: Contextualization

What if we were to follow the cue offered by these Chinese interlocutors, to think about the 2021 CCTV performance in a historically contextualized way? Today's Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble (东方歌舞团) is a reconfiguration of a group established in 1962 with the official mission "to introduce traditional national folk song and dance arts as well as music and dance works that express the lives of modern Chinese people to audiences at home and abroad, and at the same time to introduce wholesome and outstanding foreign song and dance arts to the Chinese people." The theme of international cultural exchange is one that has remained with the group since its inception. However, at its founding, this seemingly benign undertaking carried much more overt political connotations. In the 1960s, the term "Oriental" (东方) may have been more of a political than a geographical concept, encapsulating the "Third World," or formerly colonized and decolonizing countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. "The Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble was established through the initiative and attention of Premier Zhou Enlai and Vice-Premier Chen Yi themselves," explained singer Zhu Mingying in an interview with *The Paper* given shortly after her 2021 CCTV performance.

In her comprehensive history of Chinese dance in the PRC, Emily Wilcox notes that the early 1960s marked not only the starting point of major policy changes presaging the political shifts of the Cultural Revolution, but also heralded significant transformations in the dance field. Revolutionary socialist themes and explicit class consciousness were to be elaborated in dance performances, and

formal innovation was encouraged in this "new era" (p. 142). Notably, significant thematic and formal content adapted into Chinese dance during this time was drawn from African and African diasporic sources. Wilcox highlights the example of *Fires of Fury are Burning* (怒火在燃烧), performed by the PLA General Political Department of Song and Dance Ensemble in spring of 1964, a dance drama about racial discrimination in the United States that featured a passionate battle for justice against a white police officer and Klansman who abuses a young African-American boy.

The dance featured "a new movement vocabulary blending Chinese military dance with Afro-diasporic movement elements" (p. 144). One year later, the first original full-length dance drama on an international theme by the China Opera and Dance Drama Theater commemorated Congolese independence. Titled *Congo River is Roaring* (刚果河在怒火), it centralized West African dance as "the primary movement language in production," relying on guidance from the Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble, several of whose members had studied in African countries (p. 149).

Racial impersonation, according to Wilcox, has a long tradition in modern Chinese theater and dance, especially "to address anticolonial and antiracist themes" (p. 143). Thus, while performers in *Congo River is Roaring* "performed with dark body and facial make-up, as well as head wraps and costumes meant to approximate various styles of Congolese urban and tribal dress... the goal of this racial impersonation was to celebrate anticolonial themes and the Congolese struggle for national independence" (p. 149). Similarly, *Fires of Fury are Burning* featured performers in makeup and clothing designed to make them look like black and white Americans. In the Mao era, this poignant dramatization of anti-Black racism in the United States, and the struggles of African-Americans and their allies against enemies like the KKK, expressed a clear condemnation of white supremacy and solidarity with formerly enslaved and colonized people around the world.

Clearly, the performance of African songs and dances by non-Africans has a different history in China than it does in the United States, South

Africa, or other countries in which blackface was once widely deployed to mock and dehumanize racial others. During the Maoist era, the struggles of African and African-descended people represented a vanguard of anti-imperialist revolution. Learning to embody that struggle through musical performance was a significant task for Chinese artists of that time.

Racism, Respect, or Something Else?

Seeking to master the intricacies of African singing, the young Zhu Mingying spent hours in her dormitory listening to recordings of African languages. She later studied Swahili with teachers at China Radio International (中国国际广播电台), and attempted to practice with African students she met at the Beijing Language Institute (北京语言学院). As she eventually became known as the country's top performer of African song and dance, "Yiyaya oulei'ou," the song performed at this year's Spring Festival gala, emerged as her signature encore piece. According to her interview with *The Paper*, today the tune would immediately trigger an image of her in the minds of elderly Chinese. But does such an image presented today carry the same connotation it did in the 1960s?

Zhu has said her aim as a performer has been to fully display "certain African movements, African sounds, African emotions, African songs, African languages, African clothing, and African skin color." Referring to the 2021 Spring Festival performance, she said that face and body paint were used to quickly draw ordinary Chinese into the atmosphere of the dance by means of direct sensual and visual perception. "If we were performing abroad," she added, "we would use our original skin color, without make-up. If people saw Chinese dancers performing African dance with such meticulous perfection, that would be even more amazing."

This last sentence is quite telling, as it indicates that the aim of Zhu's and perhaps other dancer's performance of what they assume to be an accurate representation of African song and dance, is not only about celebrating art forms from the non-Euro-American world. Rather, it is

Chinese actors' competence and capability—whether dancers who successfully imitate an exotic image from another continent, or political leaders enacting policies to increase global connectivity along the Belt and Road—that is most at stake here. Unlike in the Jim Crow minstrel shows, where Blackness was ridiculed in an attempt to excise African-descended people from a white supremacist social body, blackface performance in today's China redeploys anti-imperialist tropes from a bygone era to celebrate Chinese greatness in a differently globalized world.

Further Questions

"African Song and Dance" in China in 2021 is indeed different from the racist mockery of African-descended people that once took place regularly in the West. By following the cue of the Chinese scholars cited above, to historically contextualize the CCTV gala, we have been able to see how such a performance does take place in a different context. It is true that China lacks Western-style colonial baggage when it comes to representations of Blackness; instead it carries the vestiges of anti-colonialism, deployed for new ends.

Still, as others have pointed out, contextualization alone is not enough to fully understand the meaning of stereotypical, exoticizing, or paternalistic images of Africanness as they circulate in Chinese media today. Perhaps those best positioned to analyze such phenomena would be Chinese scholars specializing in the study of Africa—an Area Studies field experiencing tremendous growth in the twenty-first century PRC. In the face of simultaneous pressures, from the official state position that anti-Black racism does not and cannot exist in China (Cheng 2019, 14-15), to knee-jerk condemnation from Anglophone observers of anything resembling racial attitudes and practices familiar to those residing in the Western hemisphere, to the threat of attacks by ultra-nationalistic Chinese internet trolls, how do China-based intellectuals intervene in debates about racism and racialization? If their criticisms come across as subtle or subdued, we must learn to read these muted expressions, and if some discussions take place more openly and

vociferously, it should be asked why and how certain narratives are able to gain traction, and among whom. Though prompted by a frivolous staging of racial difference, the reactions described here point to serious questions for research and reflection.

Further Readings

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