

Constructing ambivalent masculinity and constant femininity in interracial families: Media representations of African-Chinese marriage on Xiaohongshu

Keywords: African-Chinese marriage, feminist critical discourse analysis, masculinity and femininity, media representation, Xiaohongshu

Abstract

Interracial marriage has increasingly gained visibility on Chinese social media platforms, especially African-Chinese marriage which has been popularly represented, sparking heated discussions publically. However, although several studies have touched upon interracial marriage with analyses through political and geographical lenses, few studies investigated the media representations and mediated comments towards African-Chinese marriage in China as it has become a hot topic on Chinese social media platforms recently. To fill this niche, this study explores how African-Chinese marriage is represented on Chinese social media through mediated public comments, and what ideological implication of represented subjectivity of male and female in African-Chinese marriage. Through feminist critical discourse analysis and intersectional perspective, it found that ambivalent masculinity and constant femininity are constructed in African-Chinese marriage through comments where Chinese males are predominantly represented as positive figures, while African men are greatly dehumanised and criticised. As for women, although public attitudes are distinctive towards Chinese and African women, they, sharing the collective identity of females, are restricted in the traditional conception of gender dichotomy. Finally, the social contextualisation of such representations and potential ideological implications will be generally discussed.

Introduction

Interracial marriage involves couples who are from different racial backgrounds (Root, 2001), which is conceptually different from transnational marriage, where couples are from different nations but may share the same racial origin (Briggs, 2003). In recent years, an increasing number of interracial marriages has been seen in Chinese society (de Hart, 2019; Han, 2021), including a growing number of African-Chinese marriages, which has gained great visibility on Chinese social media platforms (Liu and Deng, 2020; Zhou, 2023). For instance, on the social media platform Xiaohongshu, many influencers in African-Chinese interracial marriages are actively engaged, sharing their family lives and posting about relationships between couples or family members, and experiences in raising children. There are two main types of African-Chinese interracial marriage represented on social media platforms: families with Chinese wives and African husbands and those with Chinese husbands and African wives.

However, anti-black sentiment against interracial families is on the rise on Chinese social media. Notably, in parallel with the rise of global right-wing populism which is frequently coded with racism (Wodak, 2015; Krzyzanowski, 2020), the rhetoric of right-wing populism is also becoming more prevalent in debates in China's public sphere (Lin, 2021; Peng, Kuang and Hou, 2022), further deepening structural racism in China. With the advancement of online communication, the online public sphere has become a locus for the realisation of right-wing populism (Zhang, 2020). In a broader sense, the public expressions of anti-black sentiment about interracial marriage in China can be seen as a part of the global resurgence of right-wing populism, albeit with specific rhetoric and representations in the Chinese media context. Accordingly, this study aims to explore the media representation of African-Chinese marriages on Xiaohongshu, an influential social media platform in China, to examine how different people are involved in interracial marriage and what the ideological implications of this representation are.

Literature review

Anti-Black sentiment in China

Anti-black sentiment in China has long existed with the coming of the concept of "race" (Dikötter,

2015), which divides people into “essentialised categories” (Triguero Roura, 2023: 2112). During the Mao era, the specific hostility to Africans and people with darker skin tones can be exemplified by the Chinese social context when blackness in China was infused with concepts of global unity (Brown, 2016). The Third World Alliance during China’s post-war period was supported by Mao, and the state has continued to promote Sino-African friendship since his time. However, this official discourse, possibly, does not exactly reflect what Chinese residents experience daily (Zhou, 2023). This historical context is recounted by Sautman (1994): The first wave of African students to study in China began in 1960 as a result of a Chinese government initiative to provide fully funded university education to citizens of political allies. After the Sino-Soviet split, this effort was intended to foster goodwill and strengthen China’s position in the developing world. Gradually, however, African students started to express discontent with “persuasive politics, low living standards, and a dearth of social opportunities” (Sautman, 1994: 414); on the other hand, Chinese students were dissatisfied with the subsidies from the government for African students and daily trifles (such as loud music played at night by African students). Nowadays, importantly, Afrophobia among Chinese students is on the rise, with the theme of the Third World being downplayed in the country’s media. As can be seen, the relationship between African and Chinese students is complex, affected by sometimes contradictory political aims and social experiences. More generally, despite a rising number of Africans moving to China for education and business opportunities, prejudice has continued. For example, in Guangzhou, the local government has imposed strict measures against African immigrants that have resulted in their mistreatment, displacement, and deportation, in opposition to the goal of strengthening Sino-African relations (Zhou, 2023).

In recent years, anti-black sentiment seems to have become more acute, especially in the sphere of online communication. Media representations of black people can be used to reflect the public perceptions of Blackness and Africanness. Gu and Ho (2023), for example, explored anti-black sentiments on Weibo, an influential social media platform in China, after a black man murdered a female university student in Ningbo. Employing thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis, Gu and Ho found that in terms of argumentation strategy, predicational strategy, and nomination strategy, black people are usually depicted as part of a corrupt invasion, criminal animals, and evil

spirits in a dehumanised way by Weibo users. To circumvent the platform's censorship of racist remarks, "orthographic manoeuvrings" are created to convey racist sentiments. For example, "nigger", the insulting racist term, is commonly transliterated as "尼哥" in Chinese. Orthographic manoeuvrings are realised by swapping original characters for those that are pronounced in the same way, usually creating unconventional forms. It can be sensed that hostile and insulting attitudes permeate the online public sphere, and even though political censorship is applied, anti-black sentiment is unceasing and still has a strong momentum with the aid of word juggling. Similarly, based on data from Weibo, Liu et al. (2021) also investigated online anti-black sentiments using critical discourse analysis. While black people were dehumanised through the use of generally insulting expressions in Gu and Ho's (2023) study, Liu revealed more profound public stigmatisation in that Weibo portrays black people living in China as both an inferior group and a severe social problem through "sexual, legal and disease-related stigmatisation" (Liu et al., 2021). Black people, especially men, are constructed as allegedly uncontrolled and sexually promiscuous immigrants from Africa who are considered to be spreading sexually transmitted diseases unidirectionally to the Chinese. Furthermore, women who have intimate relationships with black people are constructed as "sexual deviants", and they are positioned as those who bear the brunt of the transmission of viruses from black people since they are "sexually immoral and mentally incapable" (Liu et al., 2021: 490–491). It is obvious that anti-black sentiments are rampant in the online public sphere, which further greatly shapes the negative public perception of Africanness and Blackness.

Interracial marriage in China

Transnational marriages in East and Southeast Asian countries are becoming increasingly common (Davin, 2007; Jones and Shen, 2008; Yeung and Mu, 2020). In Barabantseva and Grillot's (2019) ethnographic study, they investigated public representations of transnational marriage involving culturally similar partners (Chinese and Vietnamese) and interracial marriage (Chinese and Russian), explaining how China's rising number of mixed marriages is a reflection of the nation's growing receptivity to international marriage. The study found that the gender imbalance in China is something that the Chinese government wants to rectify through international marriage. However,

there are disparities between how society perceives marriages between Chinese and Russians and Chinese and Vietnamese people. While the latter are frequently portrayed as illegal and inferior, reflecting conventional beliefs in both societies, the former are considered progressive and contribution to China's cultural and economic potential. The favourable perception of Russian women, who are seen as intelligent and deserving of high regard due to Russia's historical reputation as a "great power", also contributes to the favourable perception of marriages between Russians and Chinese. In contrast, Vietnamese brides usually come to China through human trafficking and illegal migration, and they are also constructed as "cheap women, gold-diggers, and vanishing brides" (Barabantseva and Grillot, 2019: 295) by the Chinese media, shaping the public conception of Vietnamese women. This study offers a glimpse of the power imbalance of ideological perception in transnational marriage within Asia and interracial marriage involving Chinese and Russian partners. However, public perceptions of interracial marriage between Chinese and Africans are quite different (Zhou, 2017). African-Chinese marriages have emerged as a popular marriage combination in China in recent years, notably in Guangzhou, which is the Chinese province that has embraced the highest number of African-Chinese marriages as a result of its long history of international business and trade with Africans (Zhou, 2017).

The dilemma of African-Chinese marriage in China has been comprehensively explored in a study by Zhou (2017), which depicted the difficult living situation for both Chinese partners and African partners in Guangzhou. Chinese partners married to Africans, though they have been residents of Guangzhou for many years, are not accorded the same privileges or official residency rights as local people, and their extended family members in outlying villages or towns often do not have the means to financially or socially support them. Accordingly, they are not only excluded from the social networks of Guangzhou where they live, but also they lose the sense of belonging to their hometowns to which they have no desire to return. African partners are seen by the Guangzhou government as being a component of the foreign "floating population". As such, it is evident that most Chinese-African couples fail to achieve their objective of upward socio-economic mobility. To examine the particular challenges that Chinese-African couples encounter and how they react, Adebayo and Omololu (2020), through interviews and ethnographic observation, explored African-

Chinese couples with a special focus on a Nigerian husband and a Chinese wife living in Guangzhou. The study found that Nigerian men always have unpleasant experiences in China due to exclusion, discrimination, and racism, and the Chinese wives of Africans also endure a negative impact on their sense of belonging. Considering all of the factors that might have detrimental effects on their children, African-Chinese spouses construct the concept of “home” as a non-binary “elsewhere” to explore more possibilities to live in other countries, and make preparations to leave China at any time for the sake of a stable and better life for themselves and, more importantly, their children.

Media representations of interracial marriage

The media representation of interracial marriage is underexplored by researchers. Some relevant studies specifically focussed on the self-representation of interracial marriage by influencers themselves. Civila and Jaramillo-Dent (2022) unpacked the ideological implications of self-representations of interracial marriage on TikTok. In their study, an analysis of TikTok content created by Spanish-Moroccan mixed couples sheds light on their preferred self-representations and the aspects of their identities they choose to highlight or keep private. According to the study, designers utilize TikTok’s features to realize their “performative hybridisation,” which contends that it is ideal to seek out a fusion of both Moroccan and Spanish cultures while subtly highlighting the supremacy of Islam and Moroccan culture. TikTok enables minority creators to become visible and influential on the platform and use their voice through its unique connective and mimetic nature. However, rather than empowering individuals, the way these content creators use TikTok makes the inequality in the messages they choose to promote visible and recognisable. Accordingly, even though the popularity of self-representations of interracial marriage on social platforms can bring certain visibility to gain more attention and, ideally, understanding, potential perils and traps in the self-representation of interracial marriage still exist, which might appeal to and even strengthen racial inequality and stereotypes.

Despite the increased prominence that interracial marriage has received in social media, the literature review above makes it evident that there is not much research on how interracial marriage is represented in the media. However, media representations play a significant role in how the

general population perceives different races (Johnson, 2007; Zhou, 2023). To fill this niche, this study investigates how African-Chinese marriage is represented on Xiaohongshu, an influential social media platform in China, through public comments. As many previous studies have exclusively focused on families consisting of an Asian wife and African husband and very few discussions have focused on women's identities and their engagement in African-Chinese marriages, this study compares how families with an African wife and an Asian husband and families with an Asian wife and an African husband are represented in the media, generating more insightful and comparative ideological perceptions of interracial marriage in China. As such, the three research questions are listed as follows:

1. How are two kinds of interracial marriage (families involving African wives and Asian husbands, and Chinese wives and African husbands) represented through comments on Xiaohongshu?
2. What are the differences in representation between these two kinds of interracial marriage?
3. What are the ideological implications behind these representations and differences?

Theoretical framework

An intersectional approach to feminist critical discourse analysis

Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), an interdisciplinary theoretical perspective, integrates feminist scholarship into critical discourse analysis (CDA), facilitating and broadly contributing to the field of gender, language, and discourse studies (Lazar, 2005, 2007). Discourse can be defined as “ways of representing aspects of the world: the processes, relations, and structures of the material world, the ‘mental world’ of thoughts, beliefs and so forth, and the social world” (Fairclough, 2003: 128–129), through which people's perceptions of the outside world can be shaped (Reisigl and Wodak, 2016). The focus of critical discourse analysis is to investigate connections, such as power dynamics, ideologies, and social identities, between discourse and social institutions (van Dijk, 1993). Accordingly, contrary to feminist approaches that employ descriptive discourse analysis techniques, CDA offers a thoughtful theorisation of the relationship between social practises and discourse structures and a variety of instruments and techniques for in-depth examinations of contextualised language use in texts and speech (Lazar, 2007; Wodak and Meyer,

2001), which enables FCDA to have an edge over other feminist approaches to operate “within a politically invested, explanatory program of discourse analysis” (Lazar, 2007: 144). In order to elucidate how gender, power, and ideology are interrelated in discourse, FCDA aims to demonstrate the nuanced, and sometimes not so nuanced ways that hegemonic power relations and usually taken-for-granted gendered assumptions are actively formed, sustained, negotiated, and contested in various situations and communities (Lazar, 2007: 142), and the main focus of feminist critical discourse analysts is on critiquing discourses that uphold patriarchal social relations of power that consistently and systematically privilege men while disadvantaging, marginalising, and disempowering women (Lazar, 2007: 145).

Intersectionality is coined by Crenshaw (1989) who critiques the academic neglect of race and gender factors that collectively give rise to the inequality of women of color. By extension, intersectionality can be applied in critical gender analyses to explore other factors, other than gender, that marginalise a certain group of people. Crenshaw (1991) proposed that intersectionality is formed of structural, political, and representational facets: Structural intersectionality stresses the unequal allocation of resources and the consequences of policy because of the different economic, social, and political contexts experienced by marginalised communities; political intersectionality refers to the condition where those who identify with multiple marginalised groups may have different political agendas; representational intersectionality pertains to how public discourse portrays marginalised people and communities, frequently making their oppression and marginalisation worse.

Admittedly, FCDA does have a distinct advantage in revealing the gender power dynamics through the interventions of critical discourse studies. However, it does not particularly stress and tease out the significance of racial issues, the main focus of intersectionality, in discourse that entrenches women’s oppression. Meanwhile, when evaluating written-based data that naturally occurs in society, the intersectionality perspective would be stronger if a sophisticated method of qualitative analysis of discourse were included.

Throughout the online landscape in China, the mediated discourse in social media keeps widening the gender power inequality gap, and the existence of racial issues keeps worsening women's subjectivity and agency as well as perpetuating the discourse that oppresses and marginalizes women, especially interracial representations that have become more visible on social media platforms. As such, it is critical to combine intersectionality with FCDA to highlight marginalizations of women in interracial communities and organically analyse gender power dynamics. The ability of intersectionality to examine multiple dimensions of inequality, such as class, ethnicity, and others (Ahmed, 2017), allows it to offer insightful explanations that can be used to account for the ideological implications and sociopolitical causes of the biased and discriminated discourse identified by FCDA. In light of this, it is reasonable to suggest that FCDA incorporate racial viewpoints from intersectionality in order to broaden the analytical focus and make it more applicable to nowadays online communication.

Method

Data collection and sampling procedures

The data in this study were collected from Xiaohongshu ('Little Red Book'), which is one of the most popular "content + e-commerce" social media platforms in China (Liu and Wang, 2022: 5), which allows people to share their experiences in the form of videos and text. Xiaohongshu has more than 100 million young active users per month (Lian et al., 2021), and its users are frequently actively engaged; they not only check, like, and comment on posts by other users but also have a strong tendency to involve themselves in creating content, generating e-word-of-mouth (Wang et al., 2022: 7). As such, Xiaohongshu plays a significant role in shaping and reconstructing the pattern of public opinion (Yang, 2022). Moreover, one high-profile female influencer examined in the study only has active engagement on Xiaohongshu. The two types of African-Chinese marriage (involving African husbands and Chinese wives, and African wives and Chinese husbands) are equally represented in terms of the number of influencers of each type, which fits with the purpose of the study.

A total of 2811 comments were collected from 12 selected posts (all in the form of short videos)

published by four influencers (see Table 1) who are the most high-profile based on the number of their followers (influencers A and B: more than 100,000 followers; influencers C and D: more than 70,000 followers). With similar narratives, almost all posts published by these four influencers are on the theme of and in the context of “family”, with topics including cooking, housework, and looking after children. Two criteria were applied to the selection of posts. Firstly, the posts (short videos) should include as many family members as possible because power relations in a marriage can be fully played out through the performance and mutual interactions of each family member, and such posts are more likely to garner a wide and comprehensive scope of comments from audiences if each family member has the potential to be commented on. Accordingly, almost all family members of each influencer (listed in Table 1) are visible in posts, except for the son of influencer A (her son rarely appears in videos and did not show up in videos during the last three months), and the husband of influencer B (her husband works in Africa, resulting in his absence). Secondly, three of the most recent posts (the time of data collection ended on 19 May 2023) of each influencer were chosen, with 12 posts in total.

Table 1. The basic information about chosen influencers

Influencers	Number of comments	Family composition
Influencer A	634	An African wife, a Chinese husband, and their son
Influencer B	893	An African wife, a Chinese husband, a Chinese grandfather, and their two children
Influencer C	591	A Chinese wife, an African husband, and their three children
Influencer D	693	A Chinese wife, an African husband, and their daughter

The comments were made in Chinese. Literal translation (word-to-word translation), which is loyal to the source text, was used to convey the analysis and findings precisely in order to prevent potential translation-related errors. To ensure that the translation was accurate, reverse translation was also employed to double-check the accuracy.

Ethical issues in data collection were also considered. The field site of this study was Xiaohongshu, which is a public forum and platform for more than 100 million young active users per month (as stated previously). According to the “User Service Agreement” (USA) of Xiaohongshu which has to be signed by each user before accessing and using this platform, user comments may be circulated and used by third parties. As Stommel and Rijk (2021) also noted, data from public online sites can be available for collection, analysis, and publication. In terms of the reach of the influencers, all of the influencers have more than 70,000 followers, which is sufficient to support an examination of the influence of their posts on the public. Secondly, the analysed data comprised comments from users without any specific analysis of posts by the influencers themselves. In terms of commenters, it is crucial that Xiaohongshu does not contain any personal information that could be used to identify a user from their remarks. Users on Xiaohongshu can remain anonymous without providing their name, age, country, etc., and they are allowed to post or comment under pseudonyms. As such, the traceability of real-life identities is extremely limited (Gliniecka, 2023). Secondly, in line with the suggestion that in research on social media, direct quotes reported should be somewhat edited to prevent reverse identification (Golder et al., 2017), the comments were translated from Chinese to English before being presented. Although a word-to-word translation approach was adopted, it is hard to precisely identify the original Chinese wording from the English translation given the variability in translation. This paper derives from the author’s MSc. Dissertation and ethical approval has been obtained from the institution.

Analytical framework

Through the lens of FCDA, discursive strategies that are frequently used in examining discourse and texts were employed in this study. This study followed the proposal by KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh (2017: 3619) to use discursive strategies, referential (naming) strategies, predictational (description) strategies, and argumentation strategies deriving from Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) in textual analysis in examining “user-generated data”, including articles, discussions, and commentary sections on social media platforms. DHA, as it was first conceived by Reisigl and Wodak (2009), aligns theoretically with other critical discourse studies (CDS) scholarship by sharing the overarching objective of conducting critical evaluations of the significant role that

language plays in shaping societal dynamics (Peng et al., 2023). However, DHA places a particular emphasis on the links between historical accounts and contemporary issues (Wodak, 2009), which goes beyond the scope of this study's objectives.

Accordingly, rather than viewing DHA as a theoretical approach, this study methodologically adopts DHA proposed by KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh (2017) who extended the methodological use of DHA to analyse discursive practices within the context of social media, which is the realisation of Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS). The analytical framework of DHA is considered the most effective method for researching collective social identities in discourse (KhosraviNik, 2010; KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh, 2017; Reisigl and Wodak, 2009). The discursive strategies of referential strategies, predicational strategies, and argumentation strategies particularly offer methodical analytical categorisations with the goal of exposing the representation of dominant social groups to uncover we and other groups discursively constructed in discourse (KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh, 2017). Moreover, this study is conducted in a data-driven way without sticking to the original DHA analytical framework including five main categorisations, and the bottom-up text analysis exactly justifies the prominence of the three forementioned discursive strategies.

Referential strategies also refer to “nomination strategies”, which are used to construct and represent social actors through namings (Wodak, 2004), reflecting “the social, psychological, and political views and interests of the discourse producer” (KhosraviNik and Sarkhoh, 2017: 3623). Predicational strategies aim to evaluate, implicitly or explicitly, social actors with positive or negative traits with linguistic patterns (Wodak, 2004). What is more, I also drew on argumentation strategies proposed by van Dijk (2006), i.e. strategies of positive self-presentation, emphasising our (in-group's) good things and de-emphasising bad things, and strategies of negative other-presentation, emphasising their (out-group's) bad things and de-emphasising good things. van Dijk developed 25 analytical approaches to positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. However, I used these analytical approaches in this study selectively, as Sengul (2019) suggested that it is not necessary to apply all analytical approaches or discursive strategies in analysis but, instead, have an overall understanding of linguistic devices and choose frequently used discursive strategies in discourse.

Findings and analysis

Asian men as classy human beings and superior kin

A-481. Wǔ Xiāng Yú is more handsome.

A-99. Wǔ Xiāng Yú is so romantic.

“Wǔ Xiāng Yú” (A-481 and A-99) (A refers to the comments related to the influencer A, and “481” and “99” stand for the sequence number of the comments) is a frequent and specific referential strategy used in comments to name the Chinese husband in posts by influencer A because “Wǔ Xiāng Yú” (spiced fish in Chinese) has a similar accent to his Chinese name. The primary purpose of nicknames in China is to establish or affirm a sense of casual, good-natured amusement (Moore, 1993), which, in recent years, is obviously showcased in Chinese social media where nicknames are usually coined to express “affectionate intimacy” (Wong et al., 2021: 6). This “affectionate intimacy” expressed by the audience to “Wǔ Xiāng Yú” can be clearly detected through predication strategies in A-481 and A-99 where two positive adjectives, “handsome” and “romantic”, are used to modify “Wǔ Xiāng Yú”. In one video, the Chinese husband prepares a surprise (flowers, beautifully crafted albums, and some decorations) for his wife due to their marriage anniversary, which is considered “romantic”. Notably, both the mental (inward) qualities and the physical (outward) qualities are valued as the fundamental characteristics of a Chinese man according to traditional Chinese masculinity (Louie, 2012; Peng, 2021b). “Handsome” serves to give credit to “Wǔ Xiāng Yú” for his good appearance, supporting the positive construction of physical traits. On the level of inward quality, moreover, romance is deemed as a cherished and exceptional personality trait that Chinese women crave but are hard-pressed to discover in Chinese men when looking for a romantic relationship (M. Liu, 2019). In addition, “more” and “so”, two adverbs of degree, serve as forms of intensification to amplify the positive representation of “Wǔ Xiāng Yú”. Accordingly, this Chinese husband is comprehensively constructed as an ideal image of a male family member in China.

A-96. I didn't realise that Mr Wu is so romantic! Now I understand why he can marry this smart

and capable foreign wife.

Of particular note is that in A-96, the referential strategy is realised through “Mr. Wu”, which is a formal nomination (van Leeuwen, 2008) with only surname (Wu) and honorific (Mr). However, the honorific “Mrs” for his wife is almost always absent in the comments. Formal nomination, usually, can be employed to express respect for someone who has professional achievements (Zhang and Caple, 2021). However, the power imbalance of gender in a family is obviously displayed in this comment. A is named through the referential strategy of “foreign wife”, which is a contrast to “Mr. Wu”, describing the Chinese husband as a decent in-group person but the African wife as an out-group person. Furthermore, it seems that the predication of “smart and capable” positively constructs the image of A. Nevertheless, as illustrated in A-96, the “romantic” personality of the Chinese husband is a reason to marry the “smart and capable” wife, which ambivalently equalises unequal personal qualities, “romantic” and “smart and capable”. This argument further legitimises the idea that a good wife should be intelligent and capable of doing something useful while a good husband should just be “romantic”, a quality that cannot be appraised by any substantial criterion. Notably, this assumption is also similar to the content presented in most of their videos, in which household chores are almost always performed by the African wife. Accordingly, the argument in A-96, realised with the aid of referential and predicational strategies, reflects the inequality of gender roles in marriage.

A-199. What a good husband! How happy to be his wife! Marrying a good husband in a life really saves you a lifetime of worry, so worth it!

With the referential strategy of “husband”, A-199, employing two exclamatory sentences, “what a...” and “how...”, predicates that the Chinese husband is “good”, and that his partner is “happy to be his wife”, constructing a positive image of the husband. In this sense, the Chinese husband is represented as an active actor who has the agency to provide happiness to his wife, a passive recipient. Subsequently, the commenter starts to generalise this Chinese husband as a typically ideal husband by using the referential strategy of “a good husband”, and the recipient that the commenter

addresses is “you”, representing women in a broad sense. In this comment, merely on the basis of a video, the role of the husband is represented as a saviour who saves “you a lifetime of worry”, which greatly elevates his role, even exaggerating the value of “a husband” in a general sense. The appraisal, “so worth it!”, is given at the end, further strengthening the positive emotion displayed in the comment.

B-7. The grandpa has good genes because his hair is still so dark at over 80.

B-50. The grandpa is so meticulous about what he does, and he really loves Feier.

Similar to the way in which the Chinese husband is positively represented, the Chinese grandpa in the family of influencer B is also constructed through his physical appearance and inner personality. In B-7, due to his unusually dark hair for his age, the grandpa is complimented through the predication strategy, “has good genes”, which indirectly reveals the male biological advantages in the family. In addition to physical predication, the personality traits of the grandpa are also highlighted. Contrary to the careless and risk-taking essence of men (Joelsson, 2014), the grandpa is depicted as a “meticulous” person who takes what he does seriously in B-50, with “so” used to intensify the emotion. This portrait sets the grandpa free from the traditional perception in China that women are meticulous, and men are careless (Wang et al., 2022). This myth of gender dichotomy, partially in favour of women, is rectified in B-50 to credit the grandpa with this good personality.

Of particular note is that “the grandpa” rather than any other playful nickname is used as the referential strategy throughout the comments, which may demonstrate that the traditional Chinese virtues of respecting the elderly (Xie et al., 2021) and senior family members (e.g. grandparents) (Xu and Chi, 2018) are in play.

African women as dedicated housewives and inferior outsiders

A-45. (A is) So blessed with a considerate husband when (she) lives far away from home.

A-70. (A) Married far away but is really happy.

In A-45 and A-70, A is represented without any referential strategy, which means A is backgrounded by commenters. In backgrounding, excluded social actors may not be mentioned in texts, but we might reasonably infer who they are from some references or clues (albeit never with absolute certainty) (van Leeuwen, 2008). However, the backgrounding of A may serve to stress other mentioned social actors or subjects. For instance, in A-45, A's husband is positively predicated as "considerate", although A, thematically, is the main character who is backgrounded. Similarly, A is also backgrounded in A-70, but the verb "married" is showcased. Furthermore, the frequent use of predicational strategy to depict A as a person who lives "far away" (A-45, A-70) along with the backgrounding of A referentially displays the neglect of A's subjectivity but the foregrounding of her husband's significance, more acutely positioning A as an inferior outsider whose emotion is guided and even dominated by her Chinese husband.

A-500. You're really lucky to be married in China!

A-541. Uganda is so poor, the houses there are like kilns, and the food there is not enough, so it's nice to live here (in China). I heard from A that she has to send money back every month.

A-13. Facts have proven how happy foreigners are to marry in China. On the contrary, what is life like to get married in Africa?

In addition, the representation of A as an inferior outsider is more obvious in most comments. The second-person personal pronoun, "you", is used to refer to A in A-500. The exclusive function can be realised through the use of "you" if the speaker and the audience (you) are not in the same community or do not share common beliefs (Suryaningsih, 2021), which is demonstrated by the distinctive differentiation of "you" and "in China" stressed in A-500, implying that we, Chinese, and "you", a foreigner married in China, are different groups. Furthermore, A is also predicated as "really lucky" because she married in China, which reveals the positive self-presentation of China with a superior attitude. Interestingly, positive self-presentation is more obvious in A-541. Before positively constructing the image of China, the author of A-541 starts with a negative other-

presentation of Uganda, the motherland of A, by predicating Uganda as a “poor” country with primitive housing and food scarcity. Of note is that these negative portraits negate the idea that the basic needs of life can be provided for people in Uganda. On the contrary, China is positively predicated by saying that living in China is “nice” with the reason that A always “sends money back” to her family, which implies that living in China, A can not only meet her daily basic needs but can also make enough money to assist her family living in Uganda, implying China’s economic advantage compared with Uganda. By extension, the argument in A-541 illustrates that China is much better than Uganda in many respects through negative other-presentation and positive self-presentation, highlighting A’s identity as a foreign wife in China as an inferior outsider. Furthermore, positive self-presentation can be further strengthened through a generalised conclusion arguing that China is the ideal place for foreigners to get married (see A-13). Although the commenter of A-13 does not directly negatively portray Africa, by employing a rhetorical question, the commenter strategically leaves space for the audience to imagine married life in Africa, “on the contrary” has given the hint of negative emotional tendency. Particularly, “facts have proved...” rhetorically reflects the rationality of legitimising positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation without offering adequate evidence to justify the argument.

B-9. What a good daughter-in-law who is filial to the elderly, which is better than some Chinese daughters-in-law.

B-117. So capable! Just a little bit black.

In addition, the “dedicated housewife” is also an identity attributed to African women in African-Chinese marriages. Specifically, kinship naming, as a realisation of referential strategy, stands out when constructing the identity of the dedicated housewife. As a “daughter-in-law” (B-9), B is positively predicated as “good” because she is “filial”. Filial piety is seen as the most important virtue in Chinese social relations (Ho, 1996; Yue and Ng, 1999). It is always assumed that women are the group that should take on these filial duties because of the force of filial nationalism (Hua, Yang and Goldsen, 2019; Wang, Wan and Gu, 2023) under the patriarchal society in China. Notably, B even becomes comparable (given the forementioned racist comments) to Chinese women (“better

than some Chinese daughters-in-law”) when her filial piety is stressed. In this sense, women seem to be de-individualised and generalised into a collective identity, daughters-in-law, whose objectified function as servers and caregivers in the domestic sphere is foregrounded, thus further strengthening the gender dichotomy, limiting women’s roles to the domestic sphere, and making them more family-oriented (Widodo and Elyas, 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). The objectification of B as a dedicated housewife is more obvious in B-117, in which referential strategies are suppressed while predicational strategies stand out to represent B as “so capable” and praise B for her contribution to housework. However, such a positive construction is still accompanied by criticism of her skin colour, “just a little bit black”, which reveals the phenomenon of skin colour discrimination, with a preference for paler skin, in China (Bettache, 2020), implicitly displaying racial arrogance. The complimenting of B’s exploitable value as a dedicated housewife as well as the blatant discrimination in regard to her skin colour due to her racial origin further amplify the objectification of B as an inferior outsider.

Chinese women as unrecognised Chinese and promiscuous sluts

C-643. (I) Support (your) normal life. However, since you have married out, please leave China.

D-232. Just don’t come back.

C-26. Go to Africa at once.

Unlike African women in interracial marriages with Chinese men, Chinese women married to African men are usually negatively represented through greatly offensive language in comments. In C-643, the commenter asks C to “leave China” because C has “married out”, which deems women, greatly objectified here, as property that no longer belongs to China merely because they marry African men. Of note is that the commenter begins with the courteous statement that “(I) Support (your) normal life”, acting as a disclaimer, and then gives the reason to exclude C (“married out”), upholding the commenter’s image of being courteous and non-aggressive while legitimising the exclusion of C (van Leeuwen, 2007). In the Chinese context, when a woman marries, it is thought that she is “permanently being exported from the family” since a new “slot” is made for newlyweds,

and the previous “slot” is gone forever (Dupta et al., 2003: 8), and D-643 entrenches this traditional concept of objectifying women as alternative properties in China. However, the tone of voice is harsher and more aggressive in D-232 and C-26, employing imperative sentences without referential strategies, to treat C and D as unrecognised Chinese women who belong to Africa rather than China.

C-82. The same as public toilets.

D-336. Her husband didn't suspect anything?

D-98. Is it possible that the child is not the black's?

D-383. ...It turns out that the baby isn't Nige's (Nigger's).

Apart from being seen as unrecognised Chinese, Chinese women in African-Chinese marriages are often portrayed as promiscuous. In C-82, the commenter compares C to public toilets, an extremely sexist and insulting expression, which is used to describe people who have sex with others easily. The expression shares a similar meaning to *gong jiaoche* (public bus) and is usually employed to sexualise and slur women (Anonymous, 2021). In C-82, C is greatly dehumanised by the lack of referential strategies naming her as a person and by maliciously equating her to an unpleasant object. What is puzzling is that the slut-shaming of C is not based on any evidence, but only due to her marriage to an African man, and such sexual slander against women can be commonly detected in online communication in China (Dai, 2023). Notably, the image of promiscuity is also constructed through the theme of suspicion about the child's biological origin. In D's video, her child's skin is not as dark as expected by the audience, which results in speculation as to whether the child is her African husband's, exemplified by the implicit questioning in D-336 and explicit speculation in D-98. However, an affirmative statement can be seen in D-383 where the comment employs the phrase, “it turns out...”, which seems to indicate a rational evidence base, although there is no solid evidence to support this allegation at all. In China, the tradition of monogamy establishes the limits of sexual behaviour for people, especially for women – a wife's children should have blood lineage with the children's father, and deviation from this rule results in the wife being accused of promiscuity.

African men as dehumanised objects and a dangerous group

D-426. *Dashu* wears this polo shirt every time

D-237. Can I ask if this African *dashu* has a lot of wives?

Compared with the previous referential strategies employed to name the Chinese husband (Wǔ Xiāng Yú and Mr Wu), the African husband is referred to less respectfully. In D-426 and D-237, D's husband is named *dashu* (big uncle). *Dashu* is a kinship word designating a senior patrilineal uncle in a family, and *da* (big) usually indicates age. Although the use of *dashu* can reflect the value of family and respect for elderly people with a familial reference (Tian and Adorjan, 2016), the African husband, obviously, does not have “uncle” kinship with other people in the videos. Accordingly, the main function of this referential strategy is to assume and exaggerate the idea that the African husband is old. Interestingly, A's Chinese husband looks significantly older than A, but the age imbalance between A and her husband is not revealed anywhere. In D-237 in particular, *dashu* is geographically modified by “African”, which implies the distance that the commenter wants to keep from him, further compromising the positive sentiment of this referential strategy.

C-207. The love story of the *Kunlun nu* and the toilet.

C-328. (male) Foreigners and *zha'nan* have one thing in common, they [are] used to coaxing girls. Honest men only know how to work and earn money; they don't have time for women and can't coax them.

Furthermore, many insulting referential strategies are used to dehumanise the African husband of C. In C-207, “toilet” refers to C (the same referential strategy used in C-82 in the previous section), and *Kunlun nu* (Kunlun slaves) is used to name C's husband. Historically, the term “Kunlun” was used to refer to dark-skinned slaves, the majority of whom were part of “foreigners' (usually Arab merchants) annual tribute to Chinese authorities” (Li, 2015: 15) and were characterized as having “wavy hair and dark skin” (Heejung, 2015: 27), which was seen to indicate people who were “either ... Negroid from Africa or ... Negrito from Southeast Asia” (Li, 2015: 14), showing the great prejudice against skin colour. In C-328, C's husband is treated as a typical foreign husband who can

represent the whole group of non-Chinese men, as “(male) foreigners” is used as the referential strategy. “(Male) Foreigners” are predicated as “bad men” because they are used to coaxing girls like *zha’nan* (scum men), which is a popular Chinese term, with a similar meaning to playboys, to describe men who behave badly in romantic relationships. As such, the argument of negative other-presentation is obviously employed here to generalise foreign men (non-Chinese men) as *zha’nan* (scum men), while positive-self presentation is used to describe Chinese men (as the opposite of “foreigners” according to the commenter) as “honest men”, whose task is “work[ing] and earn[ing] money”, which echoes the traditional concept, for many Chinese, that successful masculinity should include the ability to earn money (Liu, 2019; Zheng, 2006).

C-4. Anyway, in my opinion, black people are just not as good as Chinese people; the crime rate is too high.

C-8. (I) hate the majority of black people rather than the minority who want to live their lives.

C-159. Where there are more black people, there is chaos. It’s not xenophobia, it’s a fact.

In addition to dehumanisation, many commenters generally construct Black people as dangerous instead of merely degrading African husbands to legitimise the irrationality of the marriage of Chinese women to African men. Of particular note is that this prevalently negative discourse is almost absent from comments about A and B (African wives), and as such, it is assumed that this negative representation of Black people is mainly targeted at African husbands. Black people are represented as having a strong association with “crime” and “chaos”, and terms indicating intensity – “too high”, “the majority of”, “more” – strengthen the negative representations of Black people more deeply. In C-4, Black people are predicated as “not as good as Chinese” because of the high crime rate among Black people, which is also a realisation of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation to imply that Chinese people are more disciplined and civilised, while Black people are more crime-prone. Similarly, Black people are negatively predicated through “hate”, a verb indicating strong negative emotion. In addition, “the majority” shows that Black individuals make up a sizable share of the criminal population, while the proportion of law-abiding citizens is quite modest, accounting for the reason for “hate” towards Black people. Such a discourse reflects

and even strengthens the bias of “biological determinism” towards Black people (Gu and Ho, 2023: 13), which can be more clearly sensed in C-159, where the commenter illustrates that “black people” will bring “chaos”. To legitimise this illustration, the commenter gives a disclaimer, “it’s not xenophobia”, but explains that the illustration is based on “fact” without giving adequate evidence. Accordingly, the use of the rhetoric of over-generalisation not only damages the purpose of the disclaimer but highlights the racism embedded in the discourse (Gu and Ho, 2023).

Discussion and conclusion

Through the foregoing analysis, it is not difficult to see that there are obviously different public attitudes to the two kinds of African-Chinese marriage; the families that involve a Chinese husband and an African wife receive many compliments and support, while those that involve an African husband and Chinese wife are criticised and stigmatised. With respect to the men in interracial marriages, Chinese men are positively constructed in a comprehensive way by speaking highly of biological matters (their genes), physical appearance (handsomeness), and personality (their sense of romance). However, the African men are greatly devalued in a dehumanised and insulting way. Worse still, the pervasiveness of racist speech featuring myths and unsourced assumptions in comments generalises the inferiority of Black people, which legitimises the insult and slander of C and D’s African husbands. It is noteworthy that ambivalent masculinity is laid bare when comparing the comments on the Chinese and African men in African-Chinese marriages. Based on the comments, physical appearance and personality are two potential criteria to measure masculinity in African-Chinese marriages. A’s husband is complimented as a handsome man by most commenters. However, the measurement of physical appearance is surprisingly obscured when judging C and D’s African husbands, and some of the comments relating to their appearance are racially oriented, insulting them because of their Black skin. Moreover, the sense of romance is regarded as an outstanding personality trait of A’s husband, who celebrates the couple’s wedding anniversary by making an album for A. By contrast, C’s husband invites insults and criticism (see C-328) for doing a similar thing (celebrating his wedding anniversary by taking C to take professional wedding photos). Generally speaking, an ideal male partner for a woman is popularly measured through the term *gaofushuai* (tall, rich and handsome guys), which represents three desirable dimensions, class,

wealth and appearance, respectively (Liu et al., 2022: 7). Nevertheless, A's husband cannot be regarded as high-quality by any of these three criteria because he is far from wealthy given his occupation as a farmer, his shabby housing, and austere dress, and he is obviously older than A. However, A's husband, a deviant high-quality male partner in the Chinese traditional view, is spoken highly of when he is paired with an African woman, revealing that the inferiority of Black women has been conceptually rooted among most Chinese people.

The direct comments on women in African-Chinese marriages are not only pervaded with criticism, stigma, and sexualised abuse but also reveal the constant conception of femininity that the public employs to discipline women in marriage regardless of racial issues. Insults and stigma are predominantly found in the comments on C and D who married African men. They are criticised and regarded as unrecognised Chinese, reflecting the “property” essence of women who marry out in China without bearing children or caring for families where Chinese men are the dominant figures contextually. Nevertheless, contrary to Chinese women, A and B, African women married to Chinese men receive lots of compliments. They are praised as dedicated housewives who are responsible for looking after the whole family. However, these compliments restrict them to the roles of daughters-in-law, mothers, and wives in the domestic sphere (see B-9 and other accessible comments on A); negative other-presentation is also still employed to devalue their race (see A-541). As such, it seems that it is A and B's function as housewives rather than themselves that is being complimented. The femininity of A, B, C, and D in essence are the same and constant in representations which constrain them to the domestic sphere, which places women in a home–host gender dichotomy (Barajas and Ramirez, 2007), strengthening the objectification of women.

At the discursive level, the use of referential strategies intuitively reflects the emotions and values of commentators towards those in African-Chinese marriages. Furthermore, with the aid of predicational strategies, the emotions and value orientation (such as positive or negative constructions of certain groups of people) of commentators can be further substantiated. Moreover, the employment of argumentation strategies demonstrating positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation in comments particularly reveals the essence of racism and discrimination against

minority groups in public opinion (van Dijk, 1992, 2000).

With respect to the social media platform Xiaohongshu where discourse comes into being, although there is a significant degree of censorship on social media, it seems to comparatively be more dynamic in facilitating public opinion (Stockmann and Luo, 2017). Accordingly, it is disappointing but not surprising to see racism included in the wide range of public opinion on social media platforms which it would be unlikely to witness in highly-controlled newspapers in China. Similarly to the aforementioned findings of Gu and Ho (2023) that “orthographic manoeuvrings” are found in online anti-black discourse, even though the majority of commenters on Xiaohongshu often express their racism explicitly (see extracts C-26, B-117), they typically refrain from using apparently foul language that would draw attention from online censorship or just choose to express their racism in ironic and culturally sensitive ways (see extracts A-541, D-98) to avoid institutional censorship, which is the common practice in social media in China if users want to avoid filtering and censorship (Poell, 2014).

At the sociocultural and sociopolitical level, aside from the historical roots of anti-black sentiment, political factors have also worsened anti-black sentiment in recent times. African partners in African-Chinese marriages are considered members of a “floating population” by the Guangzhou government, making it difficult for them to regularise their stay and gain access to social security. Consequently, these partners face multiple dimensions of precarity including discrimination, visa restrictions, and access to healthcare, housing, and education for their children (Jordan et al., 2021). In particular, achieving successful registration under the *hukou* (house registration) system, a marker of citizenship, is a significant challenge for African partners and their children, relegating them to second-class citizenship and depriving their children of their right to education (Zhou, 2017). Such discriminatory and inadequate policies negatively treat African immigrants as “others” and “invaders” who should not be endowed with citizenship, further strengthening anti-black sentiment and even racism among the public in China.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), particularly, has great sociocultural and sociopolitical

implications for this study. In the sphere of structural intersectionality, those involved in African-Chinese marriages can all be deemed as oppressed groups due to negative economic, social, and political factors (Crenshaw, 1991). It is obvious that Asian women and Black women are oppressed due to their gender identity, and black men and black women are marginalised due to racial issues in the Chinese context. However, Asian men in African-Chinese marriages can also be potentially considered oppressed in terms of their economic status. In this study, the Chinese men involved in African-Chinese marriages are all men from rural areas even if they may be working in urban areas. The neoliberal economy has severely undermined the traditional breadwinning abilities of working-class men and male migrants from rural to urban areas, and thus those from rural areas are significantly devalued in the marriage market by their decreasing ability to earn a living (Liu et al., 2021), and their masculinities are greatly harmed because “being the breadwinner for men involves more than just a job, in that it actually serves to legitimate their maleness” (McFarlane, 2013: 323). Culturally, failure to provide betrothal gifts will result in failure to find a wife and have a stable marriage, reducing such individuals to “leftover” men (single older men) in China who are negatively constructed as impoverished troublemakers in the media (Yu and Nartey, 2021). Accordingly, the oppressed nature of Asian men in Chinese-African marriages, given their rural origin, is prominent.

However, this oppression is greatly diminished or even disappears when Asian men marry African women, which echoes the idea of political intersectionality that the subordination of specific groups is not universal but might be contextually contingent (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). As rural men, though their breadwinning capability may not have increased, they are greatly elevated because intermarriages with foreign women represent the culmination of heightened Chinese masculinity (Zhou, 2023) in a globalizing society where Chinese men are still recovering from feelings of damaged masculinity (Louie, 2014; Zhou, 2023). More importantly, they can discard the “leftover” label, the emblematic stigma of a lack of masculinity in China (Yu and Nartey, 2021). However, as the number of leftover men has increased in recent years in China, especially in rural areas, due to the demographic crisis (Yu and Nartey, 2021), it hits a nerve when Chinese women marry African men rather than contributing their fertility to solving the domestic gender-oriented demographic

crisis by marrying Chinese men. In addition, the prevalent sexual myth around Black people is to treat them as “ideals of sexual attractiveness” (Wasniewska, 2020: 72). In particular, driven by online anti-African sentiments and the spreading of misinformation, African men are deemed carriers of viruses, and “unchaste” Chinese women are recipients of these (Liu et al., 2021: 485). As a result, anger is vented at Chinese women married to African men, and sexual defamation is used to stigmatise them since in the Chinese context, sex-based discourse, like slut-shaming discourse, tends to set a “sexual double standard” unfavourable to women (Peng, 2021a: 234). However, from another perspective, African women actually aid in resolving the problem of “leftover” men in China, which primarily affects lower-class Chinese men with less conventionally attractive physical characteristics who can use their perceived racial superiority as a form of sexual capital despite their precarious economic situations or perceived physical flaws (Zhou, 2023). Additionally, these women contribute their caring abilities to their partner’s family, exactly satisfying Chinese traditional expectations of women’s role as housewives.

In the case of media representation of African-Chinese marriages, structural and political intersectionality facilitate representational intersectionality, which reveals how marginalised groups are portrayed in public discourses in ways that further contribute to their oppression and marginalisation (Crenshaw, 1991). Social inequalities and sociocultural/sociopolitical ideologies are brought out to be reflected in public media discourses. Through the lens of FCDA, all of these public discourses, manifesting representational intersectionality, further the oppression and subordination of women, no matter their race, as exploited objects who are restricted to the domestic sphere.

Through FCDA and intersectionality, this study not only reveals the oppressive roles that women play and showcases ambivalent ideas of masculinity in African-Chinese marriages based on representations in social media comments, but also empirically enriches FCDA by responding to the proposal from Lazar (2017) to realise transnationalism by introducing more locally contextualised studies from the Global South to the literature, and incorporate the perspective of intersectionality to expand the analytical scope of FCDA. Moreover, this study also contributes to the recent heated discussions in the literature about online anti-Black sentiments (Gu and Ho, 2023; Peng et al., 2022; Zhou, 2023) by revealing the stigma and dilemmas that African people are facing in African-Chinese

marriages. However, due to the primary focus on public perceptions of African-Chinese marriages and the limited space for discussion in one paper, the self-presentations of African-Chinese couples are under-investigated, which can be regarded as a limitation of this study. Therefore, further studies can specifically investigate the influence of media production on people in interracial marriages, such as how videos on social media platforms multimodally construct the subjectivity of men and women in interracial marriages, and what are the prevailing affordances and constraints.

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