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Africa–China intimate encounters: embodied patriarchal anti-Black racism in Sino-Congolese marriages

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ABSTRACT

Based on an ethnographic study in Congo (DRC), this paper examines the experiences of eight Chinese migrant men married to Congolese women, and analyzes how they assert dominance within unequal conjugal power relations. In these unions, Chinese husbands occupy dominant positions reinforced by translocal patriarchal systems and intersecting racial regimes—including global and Chinese anti-Black racism, the racialization of Chinese people in Congo as 'fake Whites' (perceived as wealthy yet powerless), and their partners' internalized racial ideologies. This paper argues that Chinese husbands' dominance, as a gendered embodiment of anti-Black racism, manifests not only in their control over finances, decisions, and labor division, but also in how they regulate their wives' daily lives, bodies, and child-rearing, in an attempt to shield them from Chinese racial prejudice against Black people. However, this embodied patriarchal racism by Chinese men reinforces the marginalization of Black women. By demonstrating how geopolitics, racial ideologies, and patriarchal structures shape power dynamics within Sino-Congolese marriages, this paper offers deeper insights into the racial contours of Africa–China intimate encounters amid China's global rise, and further illuminates how the reconfiguration of global geopolitics and racial ideologies shapes intimate relations in postcolonial Africa.

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Introduction

> After my wife became pregnant, she had monthly blood tests to check for diseases. So, it's clear she doesn't have AIDS or any gynecological problems. We've been together for seven or eight years without any issues, and I'm healthy too. Some people say Black people are dirty or have diseases. Maybe that's true, but you can't generalize. My wife and I share meals and everything; there are no contagious diseases.

I first met Zhang Kai, an entrepreneur in his early forties, in September 2023 at his clinic in Likasi, a city that remains a center of the mining industry in Haut-Katanga Province, in the southeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter 'Congo'). Having

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lived there since 2015, he previously worked for other Chinese businesses in Kinshasa and Lubumbashi before establishing himself as an entrepreneur. Zhang Kai runs both a Chinese vegetable farm and a clinic serving local patients. It was at this clinic that we conducted our first interview, during which he made the comment above. After explaining that he met Thérèse, his Congolese wife, through his domestic worker, he spontaneously raised the issue of prejudice and discrimination from fellow Chinese migrants toward Black people, particularly among older and less-educated individuals. He seemed acutely aware of the widespread racial stereotypes in China and among its diasporas, where Black Africans are often portrayed as hypersexual, promiscuous, and associated with the spread of AIDS (Lan 2016, 2019). Rather than denying such prejudice, he emphasized that Thérèse was different by pointing to her regular blood tests during pregnancy. Yet, this insistence on exceptionalism reveals how deeply entrenched, and often obscured, anti-Black racism has remained, crossing borders and shaping even the most intimate relationships.

Public perceptions toward interracial marriage reveal how racial categories are socially stratified across space, with some privileged in the Chinese dating market (Farrer 2010). Analyzing online discussions of four types of interracial relationships (Chinese men or women with White or Black women or men) on the Chinese internet, Z. B. Zhou (2024) introduces the concept of 'patriarchal racism' to describe the intersection of anti-Blackness and patriarchy in mediated discourses on interracial marriage, immigration, and Chineseness. Recent media studies show that Black masculinity is often dehumanized while Black femininity is valorized in China, and that African bride influencers strategically portray themselves online to align with Chinese patriarchal norms and political agendas (Li 2025; Zhong 2025). This paper moves beyond the digital realm to examine the understudied lived experiences of Chinese men married to Congolese women. It explores how these men navigate intersecting power dynamics of race and gender within such unions, respond to racial prejudice and discrimination affecting their partners and themselves, and perform conjugal authority as Chinese, as men, and as husbands.

This paper puts forth the concept of 'embodied patriarchal anti-Black racism' to extend Z. B. Zhou's (2024) framework. On the one hand, this research delineates how 'patriarchal racism' shapes Chinese husbands' perceptions of their Black wives and their assertions of racialized patriarchal authority. On the other, it highlights that this gendered and racialized domination is enacted through the embodiment of both geopolitics and racial hierarchies. It draws attention to the 'embodied experience of the geopolitical' (Smith 2012) and of the racial. Bodies are not only a contested site of knowledge, practice, and power (Csordas 1990), but also a site of boundary (un) making. By disciplining African women's bodies, Chinese husbands are policing the racial boundaries between Chinese and Africans, as well as between their wives and other Black women, and between their children and others. Adding embodiment as an analytical lens enriches our understanding of patriarchal racism and its repercussions from within Sino-African marriages.

While China's expanding influence in Africa has received extensive attention, research on the racialization of Chineseness in Africa tends to center on political narratives (Park 2020) or labor relations (Sautman and Yan 2016). Intimate relationships between Chinese and Africans constitute a vantage point not only for exploring the

complexities of race in postcolonial Africa—an arena where Western colonial legacies, Chinese global influence, and local racial ideologies play in tandem—but also for understanding how the intimate is entangled with geopolitics (Barabantseva, Ní Mhurchú, and Peterson 2021). As China becomes a rising economic, geopolitical, and technological force, relationships between Chinese nationals and foreign citizens have been shifting—such as the evolving dynamics of marriages between Chinese women and White American men (Liu 2023), and between Chinese men and post-Soviet women (Barabantseva 2026). Geopolitical shifts influence not just the intimate but also global racial dynamics, particularly in non-Western contexts (Lan and Debnár 2025). The case of Chinese men married to Congolese women serves as a valuable entry point for examining gendered and racial asymmetries within Africa–China encounters, providing critical insights into the embodiment of geopolitics and racial ideologies in everyday intimate interactions.

This paper proceeds as follows: I first review the growing literature on Africa–China racial encounters through an intimate lens to elaborate on 'embodied patriarchal anti-Black racism'. I then outline the research context, methodology, and the couples' socio-demographic profiles. The subsequent sections demonstrate how Chinese men's migration fosters a translocal patriarchy that disciplines Black women's bodies and everyday lives, ostensibly to protect them from racism. I conclude that such conjugal dominance constitutes a gendered embodiment of anti-Black racism that undermines Congolese women's well-being.

Racializing Sino-African intimacies

Existing research on Sino-African marriages has primarily focused on the Chinese context. Since the early 2000s, Guangzhou, known as South China's global marketplace (Mathews, Lin, and Yang 2017) and an interracial contact zone (Lan 2017), has hosted thousands of Africans (Bodomo 2012; Haugen 2012). Lan (2015) examines the intimate and business partnerships between Nigerian male traders and Chinese rural-to-urban migrant women, attributing their relationships to shared aspirations for economic advancement and social mobility. Y. Zhou (2017) explores such couples' intercultural practices, legal constraints, and parenting strategies. A recurring theme in these studies is anti-Black racism. Lan (2015) observes that many Chinese women who marry Africans are unprepared for the everyday racism that they encounter. Wang, Hoang, and Jordan (2023) conceptualize these experiences as an 'intimate affliction of vicarious racialization'. Investigating these marriages from within, Qiu (2016) analyzes how Nigerian husbands attempt to destigmatize their relationships through practices of cleanliness, ways of dress, and moral conduct. This research shifts the focus to Africa, the other end of the bourgeoning bidirectional flows of goods, capital, people, and ideas.

Following China's global footprint, an increasing number of Chinese men are migrating to Africa under various expatriation schemes, working as traders, entrepreneurs, contract laborers, engineers, and managers (Fei 2023; Lee 2017). Many come from working-class or rural backgrounds, particularly those employed on large-scale infrastructure projects. In the African context, existing studies have explored short-term intimate relationships, which often feature exchanges of money, gifts, or sponsorships, between Chinese workers and traders and local women (Driessen 2019; Haruyama

2024; M. Huang 2024), while longer-term relationships may also emerge (Chen 2026; Wang 2023, 2026). These relationships are often framed as instances of interracial transgression, and are therefore treated both as regulatory concerns to be policed by Chinese enterprises and as sources of anxiety around racial mixing within Chinese communities. Driessen (2019) shows that the sexual intimacies between Chinese road builders and Ethiopian women are closely monitored by Chinese project managers and could result in the dismissal or repatriation of the men. Likewise, M. Huang (2024) highlights fear of racial contagion and taboos around interracial intimacies between Chinese traders and Black South African women, illuminating how anti-Blackness, Chinese racial capitalism, and nationalism intertwine. Based on fieldwork in Chinese-operated mines in Zambia, Haruyama (2024) introduces 'South-South capitalist extractive patriarchy' to describe how Sino-Zambian intimate relationships—and their disruptions—reflect broader structural disparities between Zambia and China. Such capitalist patriarchy is shaped by the policies of Chinese state-owned enterprises and individual actions within the extractive economy. While previous studies have examined external perceptions of such relationships, along with their related concerns, controls, and entanglements with Chinese racial capitalism, this research turns inward to explore how racial dynamics unfold within Sino-African couples.

This research builds on the bourgeoning scholarship on race, racialization, and racism in Africa–China encounters (Castillo 2020; Lan 2016; Visser and Cezne 2025). As China rises as a global power and attracts increasing numbers of immigrants, it has become a new frontier for examining how global and local racial dynamics intersect. These include the racialization of Blackness (Lan 2017) and Whiteness (Farrer 2019; Lan 2022), as well as the racialized construction of mixed Chineseness (Shi 2026; Sier and Barabantseva 2026), all in an era of intensifying nationalism. Studying the new African diaspora in Guangzhou, Lan (2019) argues that Chinese anti-Black racism diverges from Western discourses and is best understood through multiple Chinese gazes: popular perceptions of Blackness shaped by global anti-Black racism, grassroots reconstructions of Blackness embedded in China's specific socio-cultural context, and everyday interactions between Chinese and African people. One prominent feature of these specificities is the discourse of *suzhi* (human quality, encompassing physical, educational, and moral aspects), which emerged during China's reform-era project to improve the population's overall 'quality', particularly targeting rural and less-developed groups as part of broader modernization efforts (Anagnost 2004). *Suzhi* constitutes a key dimension of Chinese social stratification as well as the racialization of foreigners.

Stigmatized as having 'low *suzhi*', African men occupy the lowest position in China's interracial marriage hierarchy. By contrast, White partners, with perceived 'high *suzhi*', remain desired by both Chinese men (Barabantseva 2026) and women (Liu 2023), despite a decline in White privilege in China (Lan 2022). Compared with the stigma attached to Chinese women–African men couples, relationships between Chinese men and African women appear more acceptable to the Chinese public. While African men married to Chinese women are typically migrant traders, African women are often portrayed as 'mail-order brides' for rural *guanggun* (literally 'bare branches', 'leftover' or involuntary bachelors) or as women who met their Chinese husbands in Africa and later followed them back to China. Such gendered racialization of Blackness is closely tied to China's gender imbalance and male marriage squeeze (Driessen and Sier 2021),

which has raised marriage costs and left socially disadvantaged men little option but to remain single (Pettier 2022). Black women are depicted positively in Chinese social media discourses as '*guanggun* absorbers' helping alleviate China's surplus male population crisis. Contrarily, Black men are 'pathologized and sexualized', depicted as 'taking' Chinese women from the marriage market, while their Chinese wives are viewed as 'immoral and debauched' (Z. B. Zhou 2024, 232, 235). Despite growing scholarship on anti-Blackness in China, more attention is needed to its increasingly transnational formation in the Global South, including within Africa itself (K. Huang 2025).

Although African migrants are often examined as victims of racism in the West, Africa itself remains underexplored as a site of racial knowledge production (Pierre 2013), with discussions focusing on the reconfiguration of Whiteness in postcolonial Africa (Christian and Namaganda 2023; Rubbers 2009). The expanding Chinese presence in Africa has drawn increasing scholarly attention, particularly regarding grassroots interactions. Park (2020) links multilevel anti-Chinese sentiment to perceived threats from China's rise and its political narratives. In workplaces, Sautman and Yan (2016) examine Africa–China racial dynamics *via* 'South–South racializations of labor', showing that racialization involves more actors than just Chinese and African people. Ning (2024) finds, however, that Chinese construction workers in Brazzaville are shaped more by their economic roles than by their ethnoracial identity, realigning their multiple identities in daily encounters with African coworkers. Nevertheless, African-context scholarship has rarely examined these racial dynamics through the lens of intimacy.

This research adopts a transnational and intersectional approach, attending to the racial triangulation between Chineseness, Whiteness, and Blackness (Kim 1999; Lan 2016), as well as intersections of race, gender, class, and geopolitics (Crenshaw 1989). The labels 'Chinese' and 'Congolese' are grounded in nationality and pan-ethnicity yet are racially charged and best understood as reflecting the intertwined logics of race, ethnicity, and nationality in specific encounters. In Africa, Chinese migrants are sometimes perceived as 'Whites' due to their non-Black skin—locally called *Tubabu* in Mali, *Nassara* in Burkina Faso, or *Mundele*/*Muzungu* in Congo—but are also seen as 'fake Whites' for falling short of colonial-era White privilege and power (Chen 2023; Haruyama 2023; Kahola Tabu 2013). Compared to Euro-American expatriates, Chinese migrants generally possess lower socioeconomic status, cultural capital, educational background, and language skills. This underscores the importance of considering class alongside other categories of difference. Linking the racialization of Chinese in Africa with that of Africans in China, I argue that the racialized and gendered dynamics between Chinese men and their Congolese wives reflect the men's awareness of both types of racialization and the contradictions in their efforts to navigate such intersecting racial regimes. Thus, I ethnographically examine Chinese men's experiences in interracial relationships and forms of conjugal dominance, with Congolese women's subjectivities as critical counterpoints.

Researching Sino-Congolese couples in Congo

This study forms part of a broader project on ethnoracial dynamics among Sino-Congolese couples. It is based on eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork (2022–2024) across six cities in three Congolese provinces: Kinshasa, Haut-Katanga

(Lubumbashi, Likasi, Kambove), and Lualaba (Kolwezi, Fungurume). Since Congo's political stabilization in 2006 and the growth of bilateral cooperation with China, the country has attracted increasing numbers of Chinese migrants, drawn by its natural resources and economic potential (Kahola Tabu 2013; Ngoie Tshibambe 2018). Migration intensified alongside rising Chinese state and private investment in key sectors such as mining and infrastructure. This reflects the intertwining of China's strategic economic interests in Africa, escalating China–US geopolitical rivalries, and global environmental imperatives, particularly regarding critical minerals. Meanwhile, Congo's development priorities and evolving postcolonial relations with the West have further shaped these dynamics. Most migrants work for Chinese state-owned enterprises or large private firms in mining and construction, or are self-driven traders and entrepreneurs. Chinese people are now dispersed nationwide, concentrated in Kinshasa and the mineral-rich provinces of Haut-Katanga and Lualaba.

Against this backdrop, Sino-Congolese marriages are no longer rare. This paper examines the performance of racialized conjugal authority among eight Chinese migrant men married to Congolese women, mostly through customary marriage involving parental consent and bridewealth, with few civil marriages. While the broader project also includes Congolese women's experiences and Chinese women married to Congolese men, this paper does not examine Chinese women, and treats Congolese women's accounts as secondary, using them mainly as counterpoints to foreground Chinese husbands' perspectives and illuminate subtle mechanisms of domination. This focus does not disregard Black women's subjectivities or resistance, but rather uses male dominance as a vantage point to show how geopolitics, racial ideologies, and gender norms are embedded in everyday intimacy.

The study's empirical data come from three sources: (1) in-depth interviews with the eight Chinese men and their Congolese wives, conducted in Mandarin or French and audio-recorded with consent; (2) informal conversations with them and their acquaintances; and (3) participant observation at their workplaces, homes, and during family, social, and professional activities such as shared meals, gatherings, business visits, and leisure events. Conducting such multi-sited and intimate research requires sustained reflexivity and negotiation, encompassing field access, trust-building, and the navigation of shared social and physical spaces (Chen 2023, 2025). For example, Chinese men typically ran their own businesses or held jobs across different regions of Congo, worked long and irregular hours, and generally came from underprivileged backgrounds where social science research was unfamiliar, requiring considerable time and the cultivation of relationships before meaningful engagement became possible. These challenges also account for the limited number of Chinese men included in this paper. The men, aged late thirties to sixties, have significantly younger wives, with age gaps of ten to thirty years. Two live in Kinshasa, four in Haut-Katanga, and two in Lualaba. Five are self-employed entrepreneurs or traders; three work for small-scale Chinese private companies. Unlike employees of state-owned enterprises, who face restrictions on mobility and interracial relationships (Driessen 2019), these men experience fewer constraints. They generally met their Congolese partners at work or through acquaintances. Most come from working-class or rural backgrounds with limited education; only two completed college. Their provincial origins range from coastal Zhejiang and Guangdong to inland Jiangxi and Inner Mongolia. Before

their current marriages, four were divorced, three single, and one had not legally dissolved his marriage in China. Of the eight couples, two were legally married, while six were in customary marriages that may later be formalized. At the time of the interviews, four couples had children, two wives were pregnant, and two couples had none.

Migrating to Congo: the making of a translocal patriarchy

I first met William, a man in his early forties from a provincial capital, in December 2022 at his home in Lubumbashi. He had arrived in Congo in 2021 to work for a Chinese truck trading company, seeking to escape China's strict COVID-19 restrictions. Shortly after, he met his future wife, Désirée, then eighteen, during a work visit to a Chinese compound where she worked as a cleaner to support her family. William was struck by her 'tall, slim figure and beautiful look', contrasting it with what he called the 'unacceptable typical African female body'. 'Love always starts with physical attraction', he recalled. He later admitted to having 'lied' to persuade Désirée to quit her job and become his French tutor—a role that turned into a relationship after four or five months.

After earning a degree in Kiswahili in 2004, William worked in Tanzania for three years. He then admitted he was not attracted to Black women, citing their 'plump figure', and was in a long-distance relationship with a Chinese woman. However, he later complained about his ex-girlfriends and Chinese women more generally, lamenting changing gender dynamics in contemporary China, where he felt traditional female roles and values had disappeared. He said:

> I'm not particularly attracted to Chinese women. At my age, I've had my share of relationships with different types of girlfriends. I feel that, generally speaking, Chinese women don't leave much room for spontaneity or being a little whimsical. For me, love is about tolerance, about accepting each other's quirks. But if I'm [expected to always be] disciplined, like a soldier, then what's left [for my partner] to actually tolerate in me?

William praised Congo's conjugal dynamics for resembling traditional Chinese norms, citing the Confucian saying '*zaijia congfu, chujia congfu*' (a woman should obey her father before marriage and her husband afterward). 'After our marriage, I'm the one who decides', he added. He prefers Congolese women partly because patriarchal norms persist locally, though he never explicitly instructs his wife; societal expectations serve as implicit social surveillance, similar to ancient China. He gave the example of Désirée's 'unconscious habit': 'When we have male guests, she never sits here. She always retreats to the back. If I don't call her, she won't come out. I don't need to teach her'. The geographic relocation of Chinese men like William places them in a 'transnational social space' (Faist 2004), where local gender norms grant them more conjugal authority than in China, where patriarchy is in decline. These shifts in 'social location' allow them to exercise 'gendered social agency', revive patriarchal power across borders, and ultimately reshape the 'gendered geographies of power' (Pessar and Mahler 2003) in Sino-African marriages.

William's dominance in marriage stems from both local patriarchal norms and his economic privilege. Working for the Chinese company, he earned over $2,000 per month (US dollars are widely used in Congo alongside the official currency, the

Congolese franc)—far above my Congolese interlocutors, whose salaries ranged from $100 to $300. He gave Désirée $500 monthly as 'pocket money', which he likened to 'raising a child', and also supported her family. As the sole breadwinner, he controlled household decisions, finances, and his own routines, such as staying up all night playing video games. Africanist scholars have long argued that material exchange, intertwined with affect, is central to 'love in Africa' and that such 'provider love' can reinforce gender inequality (Cole and Thomas 2009). The age gap further reinforced William's conviction that his decisions for Désirée were justified, akin to those of an authoritative parent. Such control extended to Désirée's education and employment: when we first met, she had just completed her first year in Accounting at the University of Lubumbashi. William discouraged her from low-paid jobs, fearing it would make him lose face. He planned for her to complete a bachelor's, possibly a master's, and become independent by twenty-five, seeing education as key to distinguishing her from other Congolese women and improving her *suzhi*. While awaiting a job in Zambia, he had her put her studies on hold to join him in Lusaka and study Chinese at the Confucius Institute. When we met again in August 2023, she was preparing to move to Kampala, Uganda, as William had taken a job in the Ituri Province near the Ugandan border. By March 2025, she had transferred to a university in Kolwezi, where William was based. In December 2025, William told me on WeChat they were moving to Zambia for 'better living conditions', as Désirée was five months pregnant.

Migration to Congo has enhanced William's authority as a husband and elevated his socio-economic status both within his household and beyond. It has also altered how he is racially perceived: 'In Congo, both White and Chinese people are called *Muzungu* [White]. Being White means being very wealthy'. Chinese migrants' perceived Whiteness, albeit 'fake', repositions them in the Congolese social hierarchy. This upward social mobility contrasts with their marginalized status in China, where most were middle-aged *guanggun* or divorced men excluded from the marriage market (Driessen and Sier 2021). In post-reform China, male marriageability requires financial security—homeownership, a car, and a bridewealth up to 200,000 yuan (approximately $28,000), varying by region. Marriage has become increasingly contested in contemporary China, as it involves negotiations between material and emotional considerations, alongside other practical concerns, with the family remaining central despite growing individualization (Pettier 2022). More importantly, the ambivalent 'love' discourages many from pursuing romantic relationships. William blamed his difficulties in China on 'not meeting Chinese women's aesthetic standards'—a concern he found irrelevant in Congo: 'Here, all they see is that I'm White!' When planning his customary marriage, his in-laws demanded a $10,000 bridewealth, seeing him as a wealthy *Muzungu*. William negotiated it down to $2,500, citing his regular support for Désirée's family and sibling's school fees. He noted that while such a sum is comparable in some parts of China, it was entirely unrealistic in Congo.

William's perceived Whiteness—associated with wealth and development—affords him advantages in the local marriage market and reinforces his authority as a *Muzungu* husband. This power allows him to dictate the form and timing of marriage. He considered civil marriage unnecessary as long as his in-laws accepted their common-law

union after the bridewealth. Although Désirée wanted a church wedding, William dismissed it. Many Chinese men delay formalizing marriages until 'necessary', for instance, when applying for Chinese citizenship for their children or planning travel to China, so as to avoid complications if the relationship ends. Sometimes even customary marriage is postponed. For example, Boss Wei, in his forties, initially cohabited without formalizing, preferring to marry in China. When his partner became pregnant, he joked, 'If you give me a son, I'll marry you. If not, I won't'. After they had a boy, he paid a $7,000 bridewealth when the child turned one, finalizing the customary marriage.

Cross-border marriages are often shaped by perceived differences between spouses: men from developed countries seek partners from developing countries, seen as less independent and more family-oriented, while women from the Global South prefer men from the Global North, perceived as modern and egalitarian (Cole 2008; Constable 2005; Fresnoza-Flot 2021; Neveu Kringelbach 2016; Sizaire 2024). In contrast, Chinese men in this study migrate mainly for economic opportunities, not marriage. Their unions with Congolese women reflect contrasting social locations: marginalized in China as *guanggun* amid a bride shortage and rising marriage costs versus their elevated social and economic status in Congo, and the weakening of patriarchy in China versus the reinforcement of masculinity and conjugal authority in Congo. Marriage to Congolese women allows these men to restore, enhance, or 'rescue' their masculinity (Driessen and Sier 2021), reclaiming dominance and 'practising privilege' in transnational spaces (Scuzzarello 2020). I term this dynamic 'translocal patriarchy', highlighting the situated, relational character of patriarchal norms enacted across interconnected scales, including rural-urban, local-global, and nation-states (Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013). Translocal patriarchy reasserts male conjugal authority in domains such as household finances and decision-making, spousal career and education, daily routines, and child-rearing. Such patriarchal domination compromises women's well-being, especially for Black women, who may face the compounded effects of both patriarchy and anti-Blackness.

Disciplining Black women's bodies and everyday lives

While arguing that Congolese wives face intersecting patriarchal and racial oppression, this paper neither essentializes Chinese husbands as racists nor portrays Congolese women as passive or agentless. Rather, it shows how these men are shaped by gendered social norms and racial ideologies, leading them to enact oppression in the name of care or love. In this section, I present three ethnographic cases to illustrate how Chinese husbands regulate the bodies and daily lives of their Congolese wives in an effort to protect both themselves and their spouses from anti-Black prejudice and discrimination. These practices undermine Black women's bodily and personal autonomy, often compelling them to adopt lifestyle or parental choices imposed by Chinese husbands. While some women interpret or indirectly resist these practices to reclaim autonomy, others may reinforce their husbands' dominance, a point which will be revisited at the end of the paper.

Food practices: 'she uses chopsticks just like we Chinese do.'

I met Boss Wei in September 2023 at his home in Kolwezi. A Mongolian Chinese from a cultural background without surnames, he adopted a Han Chinese surname resembling the first syllable of his given name—thus known as 'Boss Wei'—to ease communication with other Chinese individuals. This reflects both his Sinicization and active assimilation into Han Chinese cultural norms. During our interview, he frequently spoke of 'we Chinese' and 'Chinese culture', rarely mentioning his Mongolian heritage. Boss Wei arrived in Congo in 2014 as a mechanic for a small Chinese firm and learned basic Kiswahili within six months. After returning briefly to China, divorcing his wife with whom he had a daughter, he came back in 2016 to open an artisanal mining depot (trade center). In 2019, he began a relationship with Micheline, then eighteen, from a disadvantaged family. They had first met two years earlier *via* a housekeeping referral, he initially declined to hire her due to her young age, but stayed in touch through WeChat. Gradually, he saw her as 'kind and respectable' and supported her return to high school. Their relationship solidified after she graduated and forewent college. In 2020, Micheline gave birth to a son, formalizing their customary marriage (as noted previously). At the time of my visit, three of Micheline's siblings lived with them—two brothers employed by Boss Wei and a younger sister who assisted with childcare.

Our first interview took place at the dining table while their three-year-old son played on the sofa with their younger sister. I recall leftover food, especially *mantou*—northern Chinese steamed buns—covered with a dome-shaped lid to keep flies away. Boss Wei mentioned that Micheline prepared the meal alone and praised her virtues, which, he said, distinguished her from other Black women. He attributed this to her eagerness to learn and gradually adopt what he considered his good qualities. He explained:

> My wife sees a lot of good in me, so she's following my lead, leaving everything behind from before, such as the food she eats, the stuff she uses, and the clothes she wears. She now keeps making Chinese dishes and cooking our rice, hand-rolled noodles, and hanging noodles. She's adapted to all of it. She is great, not like others who might say, 'I will have a bit today, but I won't eat it tomorrow'. I showed her twice, and now she does it all herself after seeing how I do things.

Like Boss Wei, many Chinese husbands expect their wives to cook Chinese food. William noted, 'She likes Chinese food. She uses chopsticks just like we Chinese do. She also eats Western food, like steak. But she doesn't like local food. Honestly, the local food isn't very good anyway'. Many Chinese described Congolese food as 'dirty', 'disgusting', 'unhealthy', or 'gross', and viewed Congolese people as 'uncivilized', 'backward', or 'primitive' for eating with their hands. On Chinese social media, embracing Chinese culture—especially the cuisine—is a marker of a 'good foreign bride', particularly for Black women (Li 2025; Zhong 2025). In contrast, Congolese food is often rejected by Chinese husbands. Though none reported explicitly forbidding their wives from eating local dishes, many women confirmed this rejection, typically attributing it to 'different culinary culture and taste'. In striving to be a 'good wife' who 'respects' her husband—a valued feminine ideal within local gender norms—most learned to

cook Chinese food. Meanwhile, they often prepare Congolese food (e.g. *fufu*/*bukari*, *pondu*, *chikwange*) for themselves, generally eating alone. Similarly, Kaminsky (2025) shows that in Kenya, Chinese foodways construct culinary and cultural superiority, revealing how bodies are racialized through what people eat—or refuse to eat.

After our interview, Boss Wei took Micheline, her siblings, and me to a Chinese restaurant, where they comfortably used chopsticks and ate Chinese dishes. Despite being an ethnic minority, Boss Wei embraces Han-centered Chinese culture abroad, encouraging his wife and her siblings to appreciate this culture as 'superior' to local practices. Although he occasionally highlights Mongolian virtues such as honesty, straightforwardness, and generosity, he draws on Chinese cultural norms deeply engrained in the nation-building project and bounded by the nation-state's territory and imagination. For him, staples such as steamed buns, rice, and noodles symbolize 'Chinese food', rather than the diverse cuisines of ethnic minorities in Inner Mongolia. This shows how China's rise not only fosters the internalization of Han Chinese cultural identity among ethnic minorities, but also transforms some of them into agents perpetuating a perceived 'superior' Chinese culture in diasporic and interracial settings.

Body hygiene: 'I taught my wife and children to shower at night.'

While in his fifties, Boss Yang arrived in Congo in 2015 after selling his clothing shop to help his nephew, who had prospered in the artisanal mining sector. I first met him in Lubumbashi, at the guesthouse where I stayed twice during fieldwork. He often lodged there while traveling for business from Kolwezi, where he now lives and works. We got to know each other when I volunteered as a translator during his meetings with Congolese business partners. I interviewed him during one of his stays and later visited his home in Kolwezi, where I also spoke with his wife, Tina. Divorced before migrating to Congo, Boss Yang sought to seize opportunities from Africa–China cooperation and to build wealth faster than he could in China. After working for his nephew, he established his own business and now co-manages an artisanal mining depot. He met Tina through WeChat's *fujin de ren* ('people nearby') feature while doing business in Kambove. Then in her twenties, Tina was a university graduate employed at a mining company. Although Boss Yang had learned some Kiswahili, they mostly communicated *via* WeChat's translation function. Three months after first contact, they decided to live together. When I visited them in September 2023, they had three daughters but were not yet legally married. Boss Yang had not paid the bridewealth as he conflated it with monthly support to Tina's family, and planned to combine the customary, civil, and church ceremonies into a single event before sending their daughters to China for schooling. A marriage certificate would be necessary for their citizenship, passports, and for Tina's visa application. For Boss Yang, this procedure was merely a matter of paperwork and ritual; for Tina, bridewealth was essential to formalizing their long-overdue marriage.

Like other Chinese husbands, Boss Yang is aware of common Chinese stereotypes about Black women—such as assumptions of sexual promiscuity or high HIV/AIDS prevalence. While Zhang Kai emphasized his wife's regular blood tests during pregnancy, Boss Yang instead highlighted how Tina stood out socially from other women.

He praised her education, multilingual ability, kindness, and willingness to learn from him—echoing Boss Wei's remarks about his own wife. He proudly noted that Tina cooks rice 'better than many Chinese' and prepares a range of Chinese dishes. He also remarked that their children differ from other Congolese kids—for example, using chopsticks instead of eating with their hands. According to him, these habits reflect his careful instruction:

> I taught my wife to shower at night, no matter how late it is, and my children follow the same routine. While Black children usually shower in the morning, my children shower before bed at night. Black children who don't shower at night might have body and bed odors, but our beds don't have that issue. Otherwise, people would look down on us, but that can't happen.

When I told Chinese friends and interlocutors that I had taken the local bus between Lubumbashi and Kolwezi, I was often asked: 'When you take the bus with Congolese people, how can you tolerate the smell?' Chinese migrants frequently racialize Blackness through sensory experiences—especially body odor. The perceived 'bad smell' is linked by Chinese migrants to 'backwardness,' 'uncleanliness,' 'disgust,' 'poverty,' and 'poor hygiene,' traits projected onto Blackness and regarded as requiring correction or discipline (Douglas 1966). This derogatory perception of *heirende weidao* (literally 'the smell of Black people'), together with skin color, living habits, and low *suzhi*, forms a core element of anti-Black racial discourse both in China and across its diasporas (Castillo 2020; Lan 2019). William likewise remarked that Désirée 'doesn't smell like other Black women' because she now showers daily, thanks to improved living conditions at home, unlike those unable to bathe regularly due to poverty. Boss Yang similarly 'teaches' Tina and their daughters to adopt what he considers 'superior' Chinese hygiene norms, aiming to protect them from racialized stigma tied to body odor. Notably, Qiu (2016) observed a parallel among Nigerian husbands who viewed their Chinese wives as 'unclean' for bathing only at night and sought to correct them. Such examples highlight the heterogeneous and bidirectional nature of South–South racialization in non-Western contexts—where racialized meanings are not solely rooted in phenotypical difference. In China, African men may racialize Chinese wives through notions of bodily or moral impurity (Qiu 2016), while in Congo, Chinese men similarly racialize their Congolese wives based on hygiene and odor. These dynamics show how Chinese patriarchal anti-Black racism not only reproduces global racial stereotypes but also takes on new complications in both Chinese (Lan 2016, 2019) and Congolese contexts. It is deeply entangled with *suzhi* discourses, developmentalist narratives, local and global racial knowledge, and nationalist sentiment.

Child-rearing: 'It's best not to expose my children to religion here.'

Lao Cheng, in his early fifties, first arrived in Congo in 2016. After working there for over a year, he briefly returned to China but soon came back to establish his own catering business serving Chinese clients. When his second Chinese wife refused to accompany him, he filed for divorce, explaining: 'There's no reason for my wife to enjoy life in China while I struggle abroad; a husband and wife should work together

toward wealth'. In 2022, a Chinese acquaintance introduced him to Amélie, then twenty years old, who later became his wife. They married through both customary and civil procedures in August 2023—just three weeks before my visit. Lao Cheng paid a $1,500 bridewealth and registered the union, though no ceremony was held, as they planned to celebrate after their baby's birth. When I interviewed them the following month, Amélie was three months pregnant. The pregnancy was the main reason Lao Cheng decided to formalize the relationship, as he wanted children and to 'take responsibility'. Having had only daughters with his ex-wife and coming from a region where patriarchal values—particularly the preference for sons—remain strong, he was pleased with the marriage and hopeful for more children, ideally including a son.

During our conversation, Lao Cheng spoke at length about his plans for their unborn child, especially regarding education. When I asked about the issue of the child's citizenship—given that both China and Congo prohibit dual nationality—he explained:

> [Getting Chinese] nationality or not, that's another issue. What matters is that once the child is born, I will definitely take them back and raise them within the Chinese culture. Otherwise, if they grow up here without learning our culture, they'll become like the people here, without values, like bandits, not proper people, right?

For Lao Cheng, cultural affiliation takes precedence over citizenship or skin color in determining whether his mixed child is 'Chinese enough'. Implicit in this belief is a sense of Congolese cultural inferiority, which he associates with the low *suzhi* commonly attributed to Black people. He hoped his wife would study in China while caring for their child, seeing this as an investment in their future. Unlike many Sino-Congolese couples, Lao Cheng had already decided to settle permanently in Congo. He believed that as long as his children mastered Chinese language and culture, they could thrive there and find employment with Chinese companies. While acknowledging the utility of French and local languages, he cautioned, 'It's best not to expose my children to religion here'. For him, religion was a form of 'brainwashing' that rigidifies thought. He described Congolese Christians as passively thanking God instead of helping themselves, waiting for divine intervention rather than working hard. Like most Chinese migrants in Congo, Lao Cheng identified as atheist and regarded religion with hostility, associating it with 'backwardness' and 'irrationality' and blaming it for Black people's 'laziness', 'poverty', and 'ignorance'. The racialization of Blackness thus intertwines deeply with religion. Although he could not change Amélie's faith and allowed her to attend church, he insisted that their children be shielded from what he called the 'erosion of religion'.

Whether their children appear—or become—sufficiently Chinese is a major concern for many Chinese men. Fathers emphasize raising 'more Chinese' children by instilling Chinese values, sending them to school in China, and shielding their bodies from religious 'erosion', thereby cultivating *suzhi*. Afro-Chinese mixedness, unlike White-Chinese mixedness, is often considered 'pollution' of Chinese blood and 'a threat to the unity and purity of Chineseness' in China (Sier and Barabantseva 2026, 87; see also Shi 2026). This preoccupation recurred across interviews. In April 2026, William sent photos of his newborn son, writing, 'My son looks totally Chinese; I'm extremely

satisfied. People would even forget his mother is Congolese'. He echoed an earlier remark: 'If my future children look more Chinese, I will send them to China. Otherwise, they will remain in Congo'. Sino-Congolese children's bodies thus become sites of racial boundary-making and identity engineering that reflect Chinese fathers' embodied racial ideologies.

Lao Cheng never discussed plans for their children with Amélie, who wished to raise the child in Congo so that they would 'know the existence of God' and become Christian. Other Congolese wives expressed similar aspirations. When I first met Tina on a Sunday, she had just returned from church with her daughters—something Boss Yang knew but framed as her personal faith. When asked whether their children practiced religion, he dismissed it, insisting: 'What do little kids know? They're just following their mum and playing [at church]. When they're older and wiser, I won't let them believe in that'. Despite limited decision-making power in marriage, Congolese women, as primary caregivers, exert significant influence over their children, often beyond their husbands' awareness. Yet, they may also reproduce internalized hierarchies: all four mothers prioritized—or exclusively used—French over Lingala or Kiswahili when speaking to their children, as French—the former colonizer's language—signals education and high social status in Congo (see also Haruyama 2023). Children of Sino-Congolese couples are commonly perceived as 'Chinese kids', 'White babies', or 'different from Congolese children'. Congolese women often invoked valorized non-Black features and Chinese traits to justify raising a 'Chinese child' distinct from Congolese children. Accordingly, all families enrolled or planned to enroll their children in international schools in pursuit of better education. Although Chinese fathers, often occupied with work, rarely teach Chinese at home—and their Congolese wives typically do not speak the language—they remain confident that their children will acquire the Chinese language and culture once sent to China.

Embodied patriarchal racism within Africa–China intimate encounters

This research shows that migration to Congo elevates the social status of Chinese men, often former rural *guanggun* or divorcés, revitalizing their masculinity and granting greater conjugal authority through marriage to younger Congolese women. This 'translocal patriarchy' draws on local gender norms, relative economic privilege, and racialized Chineseness—or perceived Whiteness. These men carry racial ideologies from China while also developing new prejudices through daily interactions with Congolese people. Within Chinese communities, Blackness—best understood in relation to hegemonic Whiteness and Chineseness amid China's rise—is linked to 'poverty', 'backwardness', 'barbarism', 'sexual promiscuity', 'disease', 'dirtiness', 'laziness', and 'low *suzhi*' (see also Lan 2019). To shield themselves and their wives from anti-Black prejudice, these men lean on 'translocal patriarchy' to assert dominance as Chinese, as men, and as husbands—transforming their spouses and disciplining their everyday lives. They regard Congolese culture, food, and hygiene as 'inferior', expecting wives and children to assimilate into a 'superior' Chinese culture. This dynamic reflects, on the one hand, Chinese men's awareness of ambivalent racialization and the contradictions of navigating intersecting racial regimes, and on the other, the growing nationalism and cultural confidence accompanying China's global rise.

Chinese men typically control household finances, the division of labor, and key family decisions. They shape their spouses' educational and professional paths and regulate their everyday practices as Black women and mothers. I conceptualize these practices as forms of 'embodied patriarchal anti-Black racism', enacted through multiple, interrelated embodiment processes. Sino-Congolese marriages *embody* broader Africa–China asymmetries, with China positioned as 'big brother', 'mentor', or 'teacher', and African countries cast as passive 'aid recipients' or 'students'. Chinese men *embody* anti-Black racial politics while simultaneously *embodying* patriarchal authority. These racial and patriarchal hierarchies are imposed onto their wives, who are expected to *embody* them in ways that distinguish themselves from other Blacks. Ultimately, the Black female body becomes a site where cultural norms, national pride, as well as gendered and racialized power are inscribed and contested. This research extends Z. B. Zhou's (2024) notion of 'patriarchal racism' in three ways. First, it moves beyond the Chinese context and digital spaces to examine how racism and gender tensions converge transnationally. Second, it shifts from discursive analysis to embodied everyday experiences within interracial marriages. Finally, it introduces 'embodiment' as an analytical tool to explore how patriarchal racism is internalized, performed, and reproduced by Chinese men married to Black women.

Drawing on Sino-Congolese marriages, this paper offers nuanced insights into how evolving geopolitics—particularly China's rise in Africa—alongside circulating racial ideologies and shifting gender norms, shape the dynamics of Sino-African couples. By critiquing what I term 'embodied patriarchal anti-Black racism' among Chinese husbands, the paper shows how Black women experience unequal conjugal power relations shaped by racialized Blackness and translocal patriarchy, situating them in disadvantaged gendered social locations. Nevertheless, these women are not without agency and may interpret male domination in ways that also contribute to its reproduction. Désirée, for example, viewed William as less authoritarian than Congolese men whom she described as 'household chiefs who neither allow women to speak nor listen to them'. While William controlled household finances, he did not regulate how she spent the money he gave her. Before meeting him, Désirée viewed Chinese men as 'immoral', 'bizarre', 'discriminatory', and 'disrespectful', but saw William as distinct from other Chinese men. She deliberately invited only close relatives to their customary marriage to avoid others assuming she had become wealthy through 'marrying a White man'. Grateful for his support of her higher education, she followed his advice on her major and study destination as a form of 'respect' and 'sacrifice'. Without his knowledge, she also saved money to open a small grocery shop near her parents' home, both to gain some economic autonomy and to support her extended family, whose financial requests William resented. By foregrounding Chinese husbands' domination, this paper leaves Black women's responses and resistance underexplored; future studies should center their perspectives to further illuminate the intersubjective dynamics of conjugal power and resistance.

This study exposes the darker side of Africa–China engagements, often obscured by the rhetoric of Sino-African friendship. Chinese anti-Black racism differs from both the racism Black people face in the contemporary West and the White racism of the colonial era. In Belgian Congo, Black women involved with White colonial agents were subjected to structural subordination and sexual violence under institutionalized

colonial racism (Lauro 2005). By contrast, Congolese women married to Chinese men today face subtler forms of racism intertwined with patriarchal domination, often justified in the name of love and care. Yet, this covert racism reinforces racialized stereotypes of Black women, underscoring that grassroots interactions—and even intermarriage—do not necessarily foster mutual understanding or dispel racial prejudice between Chinese and African people, a question explicitly left open by Lan (2019). While these microsocial racial dynamics cannot be equated with or reduced to Chinese neocolonialism in Africa (Yan and Sautman 2023), both historical and contemporary periods share an anxiety over interracial intimacy. During colonialization, especially after Belgium assumed control from King Leopold II, such relationships were seen as threats to White prestige and racial boundaries (Lauro 2005). In post-colonial Congo, persistent boundaries between White expatriates and Black populations structure social inequality and render interracial intimacy subject to gendered moral condemnation from White communities (Rubbers 2009). Today, Sino-Congolese marriages similarly provoke concerns about the racial integrity of Chineseness, both within the diaspora and in China itself.

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