

Is Chinese IR Scholarship White? A Non-Dichotomous Critique of ‘The International as Singular, Enlightened and Sanitised’

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Abstract

Most Western IR theories – mainstream and critical alike – share an implicit Western-centric belief of the constitution and drivers for global development (towards modernity), whereas an emerging trend of literature criticizes such an assumption as epistemic whiteness. Examining global IR knowledge production beyond the Euro-American academia, this article proposes a non-dichotomous framework of critique. It centres around three interrelated conceptual modes of dichotomy, linearity and denialism, which correspond to three epistemological markers as the logics of existence, development and resistance. Mainland Chinese Sinophone International Relations (IR) scholarship on Sino-African relations is examined against this framework. The analysis demonstrates that, under the heavy influence of modernist worldviews, Sino-centric versions of dichotomy, linearity and denialism can be reproduced among academic works that are intentionally produced to resist epistemic whiteness. This poses critical questions on the applicability of epistemic whiteness as a term to capture the full dynamics. This article thus proposes an alternative term, the international as singular, enlightened and sanitized, to represent this problematic ontological imagination of the international. It calls for global IR scholars to exercise greater reflexivity towards an unproblematic acceptance and internalized appreciation of modernity as the endgame of history.

Keywords

China-Africa relations, Chinese IR, epistemic whiteness, racism, Westerncentrism, modernity, Global International Relations theories, relationality, uneven and combined development

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Résumé

La plupart des théories occidentales des RI – qu'elles soient dominantes ou critiques – partagent une croyance occidentalocentrée implicite quant à la constitution et aux facteurs du développement mondial (vers la modernité), alors qu'une tendance émergente de la littérature critique une telle hypothèse considérée comme relevant d'une blanchité épistémologique. En étudiant la production mondiale de connaissance en matière de RI au-delà des universités euro-américaines, cet article propose un cadre critique non dichotomique. Il s'articule autour de trois moyens conceptuels interdépendants, à savoir la dichotomie, la linéarité et le déni, qui correspondent à trois marqueurs épistémologiques : les logiques de l'existence, du développement et de la résistance. La recherche sinophone en RI de Chine continentale sur les relations sino-africaines est examinée au regard de ce cadre. L'analyse démontre qu'à travers l'influence importante de visions modernistes du monde, les versions sinocentristes de la dichotomie, de la linéarité et du déni peuvent être reproduites dans les travaux universitaires qui sont intentionnellement élaborés pour résister à la blanchité épistémologique. Cela pose des questions critiques sur l'applicabilité de la blanchité épistémologique en tant que terme permettant de saisir cette dynamique dans toutes ses nuances. Cet article propose ainsi un terme alternatif, l'international comme fait singulier, éclairé et aseptisé, afin de représenter l'imaginaire ontologique problématique de l'international. Ce travail appelle les chercheurs des RI mondiales à faire preuve d'une plus grande réflexivité à l'égard d'une adhésion non contestée et d'une appréciation intériorisée de la modernité en tant que finalité de l'histoire.

Mots-clés

relations Chine-Afrique, RI chinoises, RI mondiales

Resumen

Mientras que una mayoría de las teorías occidentales sobre las RR. II., desde las populares hasta las más críticas, comparten una creencia implícitamente occidentalocéntrica sobre lo que constituye e impulsa al desarrollo global (hacia la modernidad), hay una tendencia emergente de publicaciones que denuncian tal suposición como blanquitud epistemológica. En este artículo se examina la producción mundial de conocimiento sobre las RR. II., más allá del sector académico euroamericano, para proponer un marco crítico no dicotómico. Se centra en tres modos conceptuales interrelacionados —la dicotomía, la linealidad y el negacionismo— que corresponden a tres marcadores epistemológicos —la lógica de la existencia, del desarrollo y de la resistencia—. Se adopta este enfoque crítico para analizar los estudios de RR. II. de habla china producidos en China continental sobre las relaciones entre China y África. El análisis demuestra que, bajo la fuerte influencia de las visiones modernistas del mundo, es posible la reproducción de versiones sinocéntricas de la dicotomía, la linealidad y el negacionismo en trabajos académicos cuyo objetivo deliberado es resistir a la blanquitud epistémica. Esto plantea importantes preguntas sobre la aplicabilidad del término «blanquitud epistémica» para plasmar plenamente estas dinámicas. Así pues, este artículo propone un término alternativo, lo internacional como singular, iluminado y purificado, para representar esta problemática visión ontológica de lo internacional. Se exhorta a los académicos en materia de RR. II. de todo el mundo a ejercer una mayor reflexividad hacia una aceptación no problemática y una apreciación internalizada de la modernidad como el destino final de la historia.

Palabras clave

relaciones entre China y África, RR. II. chinas, RR. II. mundiales

Introduction

How should we imagine the composition of *the international* and the driver of global development? Post-colonial critiques reveal the imagination underpinning International Relations (IR) discipline – the forever progressing West (understood as Euro-America in this article) whose civilization(s) are ontologically independent of – and practically superior to the non-West, and who endogenously achieves its development towards modernity on a linear trajectory, without active inputs from the outside, and in turn ignites the development of others.¹ Drawing inspirations from innovative interventions on the ontological assumptions of IR, especially scholarship on pluriversal relationality² and Rosenberg's formulation of multiplicity, I term this imagination 'the international as singular and enlightened'. This often leads to another problem, which is the marginalization of the racialized injustice implicated in development and IR theorization.³ I term this

1. Robert Vitalis, 'The Graceful and Generous Liberal Gesture: Making Racism Invisible in American International Relations', *Millennium* 29, no. 2 (2000): 331–56; Justin Rosenberg, 'Why Is There No International Historical Sociology?', *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 307–40; Justin Rosenberg, 'International Relations in the Prison of Political Science', *International Relations* 30, no. 2 (2016): 127–53; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference – New Edition*, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009); Ha-Joon Chang, *Bad Samaritans: The Myth of Free Trade and the Secret History of Capitalism*, Paperback ed. (New York, NY; London; Oxford; New Delhi; Sydney, NSW: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019); Gurminder K. Bhambra, *Rethinking Modernity: Postcolonialism and the Sociological Imagination*, 2nd ed. 2023 edition (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023); John M. Hobson, 'Is Critical Theory Always for the White West and for Western Imperialism? Beyond Westphalian Towards a Post-Racist Critical IR', *Review of International Studies* 33, no. S1 (2007): 91–116; John M. Hobson, 'The Twin Self-Delusions of IR: Why "Hierarchy" and Not "Anarchy" Is the Core Concept of IR', *Millennium* 42, no. 3 (2014): 557–75.
2. David L. Blaney and Arlene B. Tickner, 'Worlding, Ontological Politics and the Possibility of a Decolonial IR', *Millennium* 45, no. 3 (2017): 293–311; Pablo Orellana Matute, 'Alternative Global Entanglements: "Detachment from Knowledge" and the Limits of Decolonial Emancipation', *Millennium* 49, no. 3 (2021): 498–529; Tamara Trowsell, 'Recrafting Ontology', *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 5 (2022): 801–20; Tamara Trowsell, Navnita Chadha Behera and Giorgio Shani, 'Introduction to the Special Issue: Pluriversal Relationality', *Review of International Studies* 48, no. 5 (2022): 787–800; Justin Rosenberg et al., 'Multiplicity and "The International" as Critique – A Forum', *Millennium* (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298231205236>.
3. Patricia Owens, 'Racism in the Theory Canon: Hannah Arendt and "the One Great Crime in Which America Was Never Involved"', *Millennium* 45, no. 3 (2017): 403–24; Meera Sabaratnam, 'Is IR Theory White? Racialised Subject-Positioning in Three Canonical Texts', *Millennium* 49, no. 1 (2020): 3–31; Edward W. Said, 'The Clash of Ignorance', 4 October 2001, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/clash-ignorance/>; Charles W. Mills, 'Chapter 1. "White Ignorance"', in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, eds. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012), 13–38; Shogo Suzuki, 'Japan's Socialization into Janus-Faced European International Society', *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 1 (2005): 137–64.

as ‘the international as sanitized’. Collectively, I summarize the twin problems as ‘the international as singular, enlightened, and sanitized (SES)’.

Among existing discussions, I consider epistemic whiteness to be the most adequate term in capturing SES. Existing critiques of these problems in Western IR theories use the term ‘racism’ interchangeably with Westerncentrism/Eurocentrism and whiteness.⁴ On the one hand, they insightfully reveal the broader problem of IR knowledge production. On the other hand, as debates enlarge while lacking any consensus on the exact specifications and clearly defined criteria of racism in the first place, it can be unhelpful or even counter-productive, as seen in the recent debate about whether securitization theory is racist.⁵ Similarly, Westerncentrism can mean a whole range of epistemic problems, such as generating theories purely from Western empirical contexts and using non-Western contexts only as theory-testing field, as well as extrapolating Western experiences as universally applicable.⁶

Comparatively, epistemic whiteness seems to be most adequate in capturing the twin problems above. Epistemic whiteness is a mode of thinking that permeates and structures the process of knowledge production, which comprises a set of assumptions of the international. It narrates a *self-identification* as an endogenously developed (self-achieved) power that is desirable for other less developed regions to model after, with a racialized, superior sense of *self-designated entitlement* to wealth and resources.⁷

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4. Hobson, ‘Is Critical Theory Always for the White West and for Western Imperialism?’; John M. Hobson, ‘Unmasking the Racism of Orthodox International Relations/International Political Economy Theory’, *Security Dialogue* 53, no. 1 (2022): 3–20; Owens, ‘Racism in the Theory Canon’; Alexander Anievas, Nivi Manchanda and Robbie Shilliam, *Race and Racism in International Relations: Confronting the Global Colour Line* (Routledge, 2014); Errol A. Henderson, ‘Hidden in Plain Sight: Racism in International Relations Theory’, in *Race and Racism in International Relations* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014); Sankaran Krishna, ‘Race, Merit, and the Moral Economy of International Relations’, *Millennium* 51, no. 1 (2022): 81–105; L. H. M. Ling and Boyu Chen, ‘International Relations and the Rise of Asia: A New “Moral Imagination” for World Politics?’, in *The SAGE Handbook of the History, Philosophy and Sociology of International Relations* (2018), 134–47.
 5. Alison Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit, ‘Is Securitization Theory Racist? Civilizationism, Methodological Whiteness, and Antiblack Thought in the Copenhagen School’, *Security Dialogue* 51, no. 1 (2020): 3–22; Lene Hansen, ‘Are “Core” Feminist Critiques of Securitization Theory Racist? A Reply to Alison Howell and Melanie Richter-Montpetit’, *Security Dialogue* 51, no. 4 (2020): 378–85; Ole Wæver and Barry Buzan, ‘Racism and Responsibility – The Critical Limits of Deepfake Methodology in Security Studies: A Reply to Howell and Richter-Montpetit’, *Security Dialogue* 51, no. 4 (2020): 386–94.
 6. Amitav Acharya and Barry Buzan, ‘Why Is There No Non-Western International Relations Theory? An Introduction’, *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific* 7, no. 3 (2007): 287–312.
 7. Sabaratnam, ‘Is IR Theory White?’, 10.

While epistemic whiteness in knowledge production is interrogated within the Western academia, less is explored about global IR knowledge-building practices more broadly. However, global IR knowledge production beyond Western academia should not be excluded or neglected as an object of critical examination, for both analytical and normative reasons. Given their contrasting positionality in colonialism/coloniality, post-colonial countries experience IR realities in drastically different ways than the formerly colonist, white-Western countries, which should be reflected in theory building. The agency of non-white/non-Western countries *on par* with their white/Western counterparts can only be granted by devoting equal analytical attention to their own IR knowledge production. The question then becomes, can we reasonably expect that the mainstream non-Western IR scholarship resists and refutes epistemic whiteness, or shall we expect it to be reproduced?

Given how much higher education beyond Euro-America draws heavily on Western IR scholarship, a clarification should be made on what I mean by (non-)Western academia. I consider academia to be a community of scholars, constituted by the active practices of academic authors (as well as reviewers and editors). The geographic locations of scholars' previous training or affiliations are not relevant. It is the possibility of engaging in the same, ongoing academic debate through *publishing directly therein* that demarcates any academia (which is mostly in the same language). Publishing practices (including the editorial and peer review process) actively shape it. By following and contributing to debates within one academia actively, scholars become its members. The writing of any individual scholar is a result of the generative interaction with the epistemic community (and subject to political censorship in some contexts). In this sense, the influential scholars' works (which can thus be seen as 'mainstream') examined in this article are considered representative of the broader trend and general patterns of mainland Chinese academia. Furthermore, this article considers mainstream Chinese IR scholarship as one exemplary case of the broader trends of international academia/s, while the latter can be seen as a major site of global IR knowledge production. Chinese IR scholarship on Africa is increasingly significant given both the burgeoning studies on

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8. Ian Taylor, 'China's Relations with Sub-Saharan Africa in the Post-Maoist Era, 1978–1999', in *Politics and Economics of Africa*, eds. Frank H. Columbus and Olufemi Wusu (New York, NY: Nova Publishers, 2001), 83–106; Anshan Li, 'On the Sino-African Relations in the Context of "The Rise of China": A Comment on Three Perspectives', *World Economy and Politics*, no. 11 (2006): 7–14; Christopher Alden, Daniel Large and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, ed., *China Returns to Africa: A Rising Power and a Continent Embrace* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008). Available at: <http://cup.columbia.edu/>; Haifang Liu, 'Crossing the Divide: Research on Sino-African Relations from the Perspective of Open Social Sciences', *World Economy and Politics*, no. 9 (2008): 45–51; Chris Alden et al., eds., *China and Africa: Building Peace and Security Cooperation on the Continent* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Anshan Li, 'An Introduction to Thirty Years of Research on Sino-African Relations', *West Asia and Africa*, no. 4 (2009): 5–15; Olayiwola Abegunrin and Charity Manyeruke, *China's Power in Africa: A New Global Order*, Politics and Development of Contemporary China (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

Sino-African relations⁸ and the insightful call to take seriously knowledge claims of African and Chinese scholars outside the Western academia and to study Sino-African relations in their own terms.⁹ Noteworthy, while this article embraces a non-essentialist understanding of Chinese scholars (i.e. one does not need to be ethnically or nationally Chinese), its focus is nonetheless limited to Sinophone scholarship that is published by mainland Chinese publishers.

This article explores *whether* and *how* epistemic whiteness within mainland Chinese Sinophone IR might permeates knowledge claims about Africa and Sino-African relations. While working with the notion of epistemic whiteness in my critique, the second half of this article raises critical questions of its applicability. It makes a crucial contribution by proposing a non-dichotomous framework for epistemic critiques against the imagination of the international as SES. It observes that within Chinese IR academic studies on Sino-African relations, there is a co-existence of post-colonial critiques to (the Westerncentric) epistemic whiteness *and* a Sino-centric version of SES. In this Sino-centric version, the West is replaced with China as the driver for global development, a modernization role model for others to emulate; the linearity of history and the global racial hierarchy in IR is questioned but only to a certain extent. This is due to a lack of understanding of global development in relational terms, which emphasize the interconnectedness of entities and regions and acknowledge the non-linearity of global development. This suggests that *in cases where* global IR knowledge production is informed by a fascination with modernity,¹⁰ the extent to which it can resist this imagination might be limited. Moreover, epistemic whiteness may not be best suited to capture the non-dichotomous dynamics when advancing critiques of global IR knowledge production outside Western academia. This article therefore endorses SES as an alternative.

Section 'Introduction' offers a literature review and a brief methodological discussion. Section 'A Non-Dichotomous Framework for Critique' proposes the non-dichotomous framework for critiques of SES, underpinned by the three components of dichotomy, linearity and denialism, as well as three epistemological markers, that is, the logics of existence, development and resistance. Section 'Epistemic Whiteness in Chinese IR?' empirically examines Chinese academic writings through this framework and addresses the central role of modernity in shaping and constraining the scholarship's critical engagement with dichotomy, linearity and denialism. Section 'Conclusion' teases out

9. Miwa Hirono and Shogo Suzuki, 'Why Do We Need "Myth-Busting" in the Study of Sino-African Relations?', *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 87 (2014): 443–61.

10. On how modernity can be an internalized, desirable objective for postcolonial agents and related critiques, see Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2010); David L. Blaney and Arlene B. Tickner, 'International Relations in the Prison of Colonial Modernity', *International Relations* 31, no. 1 (2017): 71–75; Homi K. Bhabha, "'Race", Time and the Revision of Modernity', *Oxford Literary Review* 13, no. 1 (1991): 193–219; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, Revised ed. (New York, NY; Berkeley, CA: Grove Press; Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Bhabha, *Rethinking Modernity*.

further theoretical implications and raises the significance of SES as a term to better account for the non-dichotomous dynamics therein.

Whiteness and IR

Although the global colour line long exists conspicuously in international affairs and Euro-American IR,¹¹ a norm against noticing race is deeply entrenched in IR.¹² Existing efforts are fruitful in illuminating that the non-White Other is portrayed under Orientalist, gendered and racialized lights by the White Self,¹³ the socio-psychological effects constituting the former's international conduct,¹⁴ and, most recently, how racism cuts across security and war the 'hard' aspects of international politics.¹⁵ Generally, while these critiques problematize the global racial hierarchy, they mostly adopt a binary definition of the hierarchy that is imagined as between the White and the non-White, working with, rather than challenging, a binary framework. The internal nuances and dynamics among the varied subjects and agents that are non-White have not been explored. Consequently, discussions are less focused on the negotiation or replication of whiteness among non-Western agents. This establishes a false binary of the perpetrating West versus the victimized non-West, silencing the voices of the non-West and depriving the agency of non-Western agents in resisting, re-negotiating or reproducing the global racial hierar-

11. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Problem of the Color Line at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: The Essential Early Essays* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014); Anievas, Manchanda and Shilliam, *Race and Racism in International Relations*; William A. Schabas, *The International Legal Order's Colour Line: Racism, Racial Discrimination, and the Making of International Law* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2023).
12. Vitalis, 'The Graceful and Generous Liberal Gesture'; Henderson, 'Hidden in Plain Sight'.
13. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978); Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 2012); Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations* (Minneapolis, MN; London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); L. H. M. Ling, 'Cultural Chauvinism and the Liberal International Order: "West vs. Rest" In Asia's Financial Crisis', in *Power in a Postcolonial World: Race, Gender and Class in International Relations*, eds. Geeta Chowdhry and Sheila Nair (2002), 115–40; Hobson, 'Is Critical Theory Always for the White West and for Western Imperialism?'; Maryam Khalid, 'Gender, Orientalism and Representations of the "Other" in the War on Terror', *Global Change, Peace & Security* 23, no. 1 (2011): 15–29.
14. L. H. M. Ling, *Postcolonial International Relations: Conquest and Desire between Asia and the West*, International Political Economy Series (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); Zarakol, *After Defeat*; Carmina Yu Untalan, 'Perforating Colour Lines: Japan and the Problem of Race in the "Non-West"', *Review of International Studies* (2023): 1–19; Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983); Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October* 28 (1984): 125–33; Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.
15. Errol A. Henderson, 'Racism and Global War in World Politics: As Obvious as It Is Ignored', *International Politics* 61 (2023): 1–30; Alastair Iain Johnston, 'Racism and Security Dilemmas', *International Politics* 61 (2023): 1–14; Bianca Freeman, 'Race in IR: Toward Empirical Study', *International Politics* 61 (2023): 1–8.

chy. The active contributions of non-white institutions and people, as well as early critiques to whiteness in IR knowledge are sidelined in the disciplinary history.¹⁶

Race is a social construct, and so is whiteness.¹⁷ Critical Race Studies has inspired critical IR scholarship in exploring a notion of epistemic whiteness in knowledge production. Conceptualized from historical cases of the national segregation in states such as the United States and South Africa, whiteness can either be understood as a daily repository of perceptions of the white majority of their racial identity, or a set of social relations.¹⁸ Whiteness can be unpacked into 'lived experiences, a structural and relational positionality, and a racialized subjectivity'.¹⁹ While whiteness cannot be reduced to class, the class factor co-constitutes the complexity of the notion of white capital.²⁰ Whiteness is not necessarily reinforced by white people.²¹ This is especially true, since

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16. John M. Hobson and Alina Sajed, 'Navigating Beyond the Eurofetishist Frontier of Critical IR Theory: Exploring the Complex Landscapes of Non-Western Agency', *International Studies Review* 19, no. 4 (2017): 547–72; L. H. M. Ling, 'The Missing Other: A Review of Linklater's Violence and Civilization in the Western States-System', *Review of International Studies* 43, no. 4 (2017): 621–36; Errol A. Henderson, 'The Revolution Will Not Be Theorised: Du Bois, Locke, and the Howard School's Challenge to White Supremacist IR Theory', *Millennium* 45, no. 3 (2017): 492–510; T. D. Harper-Shipman et al., 'FORUM: Stripping Away the Body: Prospects for Reimagining Race in IR', *International Studies Review* 23, no. 4 (2021): 2019–47.
 17. Roxanne Lynn Doty, 'The Bounds of "Race" in International Relations', *Millennium* 22, no. 3 (1993): 443–61; David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London; New York, NY: Verso Books, 1994); Anoop Nayak, 'Critical Whiteness Studies', *Sociology Compass* 1, no. 2 (2007): 737–55; Pauline Leonard, 'Precarious Whiteness in Pandemic Times in China', *Asian Anthropology* 21, no. 3 (2022): 239.
 18. Damian Breen and Nasar Meer, 'Securing Whiteness?: Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the Securitization of Muslims in Education', *Identities* 26, no. 5 (2019): 595–613.
 19. Leonard, 'Precarious Whiteness in Pandemic Times in China'.
 20. David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, Rev ed. (London; New York, NY: Verso, 2007); Steve Garner, 'A Moral Economy of Whiteness: Behaviours, Belonging and Britishness', *Ethnicities* 12, no. 4 (2012): 445–64; Pei-Chia Lan, 'White Privilege, Language Capital and Cultural Ghettoisation: Western High-Skilled Migrants in Taiwan', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 37, no. 10 (2011): 1669–93; C. Lundström, *White Migrations: Gender, Whiteness and Privilege in Transnational Migration*, 2014th ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Pauline Leonard, 'Old Colonial or New Cosmopolitan? Changing White Identities in the Hong Kong Police', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 17, no. 4 (2010): 507–35; Shanshan Lan, Willy Sier and Aldina Camenisch, 'Precarious Whiteness in Pandemic Times in China', *Asian Anthropology* 21, no. 3 (2022): 161–70.
 21. David Gillborn, 'Who's Afraid of Critical Race Theory in Education? A Reply to Mike Cole's "the Color-Line and the Class Struggle"', *Power and Education* 1, no. 1 (2009): 125–31; Nayak, 'Critical Whiteness Studies'.

the IR discipline accounts for global inequality through the meritocracy logic, replacing more essentialist explanations on the ‘innate superiority’ of the white, West with more merit-based explanations, adding to its appeal among Global South practitioners concerned with nation-building.²² Is there, then, a similar appeal for Global South intellectuals that compromise their resistance against epistemic whiteness?

A case in point is how Chinese intellectuals tangoed with epistemic whiteness at the turn of 20th century. Intellectuals had a range of responses to social Darwinist, racist thinking that originated from European contexts, ranging from contestation to full internalization, while the mainstream reaction was not an unproblematic replication of social Darwinism, but rather, a localization.²³ The purpose was to negotiate and improve China’s international status. While negotiating the relative position (as well as the boundary) of the Chinese race therein, few truly contested the notion of global racial hierarchy per se. For many Western writers who embraced the racist doctrines underlying social Darwinism to justify imperial interests, Chinese intellectuals adapted social Darwinism for a different purpose. They instrumentally employed the ‘survival of the fittest’ discourse to mobilize the Chinese nation²⁴ to ‘struggle ahead in the evolutionary time’²⁵ as a fit and civilized nation-state – essentially, to shake off the Western imperialist control over Chinese territories. Its nationalist tone and the desire for China’s complete independence sit in tension with the imperialist agenda underlying social Darwinism in Western contexts. Dissenting the Western imperialist agenda, these public intellectuals nonetheless adorned and celebrated the technological and civilizational advancements of the West and considered the latter as the goal for emulation. Logically, this opened up the possibility for epistemic whiteness to be internalized and reproduced.

Before proceeding to my analytical framework, a brief methodological discussion is due. The articles studied here were published after the year of 2000 and reflect the ongoing academic trends within mainland Chinese academia. These articles are peer-reviewed, and either published by top-ranking, core Chinese academic journals (peer-reviewed) on IR or African Studies or authored by prominent scholars at respected Chinese academic institutions. By ‘prominent’ scholars, I mean those who enjoy reputable standing in mainland Chinese academia. Their works appear in top-ranked, core Chinese academic journals, for example, *World Economy and Politics* (世界经济与政治) and *West Asia and Africa* (西亚非洲) and are often consulted by international scholars. Additionally, they actively shape and guide research directions in African studies, directing influential research centres and institutes at prestigious institutions. For example, several scholars

22. Krishna, ‘Race, Merit, and the Moral Economy of International Relations’.

23. Frank Dikotter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1992); Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 17–50. Available at: <https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/R/bo3683744.html>.

24. Noteworthy, *nation* itself was a new concept in China then, with highly debatable boundaries too.

25. Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, 139–40.

studied here are directors of African Studies centres at their home institutions, and all of them are tenure-tracked professors at reputable research universities, such as Peking University and Fudan University. Furthermore, some are the recipients of national research grants and funds, furthering attesting to their academic prominence.

This article adopts Foucauldian discourse analysis²⁶ as its main research method. It considers discourses to be generative of social reality and identity, while uncovering the nexus between power and discourses – in particular, the ways in which power makes certain discourses prominent while marginalizing others.²⁷ There is, however, one challenge. How do we, as scholars, exercise reflexivity when we make critical investigations of Western-centric IR knowledge production, given that we are already being socialized (at least partially) to its apparatus?²⁸ A possible solution is proposed, which is to question the common sense of critical IR scholarship in this regard.²⁹ Inspired by this approach, this article problematizes the commonsensical dichotomy of the epistemically white West versus the epistemically non-White non-West.³⁰ It analyses the conceptualization by Chinese scholarship of the following topics, that is, the relations among different subjects of world politics in history (*the logic of existence*), the momentum of global development and the ways in which development unfolds (*the logic of development*) and racial injustices in development (*the logic of resistance*).

A Non-Dichotomous Framework for Critique

Hobson insightfully pins down three interrelated problems relating to epistemic whiteness in IR theories (although Hobson uses the term racism instead).³¹ The first is the binary opposition between the East (defined by Hobson as all that is not the West, including Latin America and Africa) and the West demarcated by ‘*an imaginary line of civilizational apartheid*’,³² an imagination that the civilizations of the West and the East are distinctly stand-alone projects, with no intermingling or contribution to each other; moreover, the civilization(s) of the East is imagined as inferior to those of the West. The second is *an ahistorical picture of permanent Aryan Western supremacy*³³ that

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26. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 1st American ed. (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978); Michel Foucault, ‘Truth and Power: An Interview with Alessandro Fontano and Pasquale Pasquino’, in *Michel Foucault: Power/Truth/Strategy*, eds Paul Foss and Meaghan Morris (Sydney, NSW: Feral Publications, 1979), 29–48.
 27. M. Laffey and J. E. Weldes, ‘Methodological Reflections on Discourse Analysis’, *Qualitative Methods* 2, no. 1 (2004): 28–30; Iver B. Neumann, ‘Discourse Analysis’, in *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide*, eds Audie Klotz and Deepa Prakash, Research Methods Series (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008), 61–77.
 28. Samuel Knafo, ‘Bourdieu and the Dead End of Reflexivity: On the Impossible Task of Locating the Subject’, *Review of International Studies* 42, no. 1 (2016): 25–47; Audrey Alejandro, ‘Introduction’, in *Western Dominance in International Relations?* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2018).
 29. Alejandro, ‘Introduction’.
 30. Hobson and Sajed, ‘Navigating Beyond the Eurofetishist Frontier of Critical IR Theory’.
 31. Hobson, ‘Is Critical Theory Always for the White West and for Western Imperialism?’, 94.
 32. *Ibid.*, 94.
 33. *Ibid.*

presupposes 'the Eurocentric logic of immanence'.³⁴ The advanced development status of the Aryan West is imagined as forever unchanging (hence *ahistorical*) and endogenously achieved solely on its own (hence *the logic of immanence*). This also implies that the West has the power to remake the world in its own image in developmental terms. The third component is *denying the agency* of the East – predicating there is no point or hope for the East to resist or to transcend such hierarchies.

Sabaratnam³⁵ summarizes the epistemologies of ignorance, innocence and immanence which marks the epistemic whiteness of (Western) mainstream IR theories. The epistemology of ignorance denotes the obscuring, exclusion and exceptionalizing of 'the central role of racialized dispossession, violence, and discrimination in the making of the modern world'.³⁶ The epistemology of innocence 'emphasize[s] the inadvertent, unintentional, and exceptional character of racist behaviours or practices'.³⁷ This essentially excuses practices of racism as unintended or as particular incidences only, hence refusing to view them collectively as a general pattern of conduct. The epistemology of immanence refers to the notion that the West achieves and generates modernity in an endogenous and autonomous manner, rejecting the connections between modernity and the colonial or imperial conditions that contributed to modernity in the first place. This resonates with Hobson's logic of immanence. Arguably, both Hobson and Sabaratnam's analyses are in dichotomous terms by *treating* the non-West as a congruent whole. This is because the object of their critiques is the dichotomous imagination of the (non-)West in IR theories, rather than to say that they themselves also perceive the non-West homogenously.

I also draw from Rosenberg's³⁸ framework of Uneven and Combined Development (UCD), which similarly refutes a story of the West endogenously achieving its development and making the modern world. Expanding radically on Trotsky's thinking, Rosenberg argues that global development should be conceptualized as driven by unevenness across regions combined in a highly interactive and co-constitutive manner. Regions that are currently underdeveloped have contributed to the developed regions' prosperity through historical, civilizational communications and exchange. Moreover, as a result of UCD, the late developers can enjoy non-linear developmental outcomes and do not need to follow all stages of development in a linear imagination. Finally, historical development should be conceived as multidirectional. This theory reveals the non-Western world's role in global development, which is not just about racialized disposessions but also about active, agential contribution and inputs. It visibly breaks away from the binary of the powerful, perpetrating West versus the powerless, victimized non-West. It

34. Ibid.

35. Sabaratnam, 'Is IR Theory White?'

36. Ibid., 9.

37. Ibid., 11.

38. Rosenberg, 'Why Is There No International Historical Sociology?'; Rosenberg, 'International Relations in the Prison of Political Science'; Justin Rosenberg et al., 'Debating Uneven and Combined Development/Debating International Relations: A Forum', *Millennium* 50, no. 2 (2022): 291–327.

also fully embraces the ontology of relationism to capture the inter-connectedness and inter-relatedness of entities in the modern world.

Synthesizing their works, I propose *dichotomy*, *linearity* and *denialism*, as three intertwined conceptual modes underpinning epistemic whiteness but with an attempt to transcend the West/non-West dichotomy. *Dichotomy* refers to the binary thinking that the Self and the Other are distinctly different, or even mutually exclusive, with the former being superior to the latter. Here, both the Self and the Other can be either a Western or non-Western entity. *Linearity* means that world history is conceptualized as single-linear, progressing towards a set goal or common end of modernity. The Self is imagined as the most developed and most advanced along the linear trajectory of progress, and the Other lagging, with no active contribution to the global development of the modern world. *Linearity* also implies that the one lagging should follow the modernizing path of the more developed. *Denialism* is the refusal of historicizing and contextualizing the Self's development with practices of colonialism and imperialism. Empirically, the three conceptual modes demonstrate in the understandings of *existence* (how entities exist in relation to each other), *development* (whether the developmental momentum is internal or external) and *racial injustice* (whether racialized injustices are adequately acknowledged). Conceptually, this framework aims to open up the intellectual space for the non-dichotomous critical examination of similar subject-positionings of the non-Western Self in relation to a non-Western Other.

I propose three corresponding logics as the epistemological tools to detect *dichotomy*, *linearity* and *denialism*. They are, (a) *the logic of existence*, that is, whether subjects (e.g. multiple actors from the non-West and the West) are imagined as co-constituting each other and sharing some common elements, or as distinctly different entities along a hierarchy (e.g. the superior, the intermediary and the inferior); (b) *the logic of development*, that is, whether one's development towards modernity is perceived as endogenous, self-generated, suggesting universal applicability of its successful experiences or its development as provincialized and historicized, and seen as the corollary of others' active contribution and inputs; and (c) *the logic of resistance*, whether the conduct of racial injustices is foregrounded in the theorization of one's development towards modernity, and that the subordinated has both the necessity and agency to resist racial(-ized) hierarchies, or racial injustices (including everyday racism) are obliterated, obscured or excused as unintentional and exceptional, not warranting systematic reflection or resistance. Specifically, the logic of resistance zooms in on two empirical sites, that is, at the macro-level, how these works critique the structural racial hierarchies that permeate the global modern system, and at the micro level, whether and how everyday racism is critiqued. On this, Johnston insightfully reveals the co-constitution of the macro- and the micro-level dynamics, by observing that states' conduct of IR (in his case, security dilemma) can be propelled by inherent certainty of other states' behaviours, which are driven by the micro-foundations of racist beliefs and ideas.³⁹ Therefore, neither micro- nor macro-level dimension can be left aside when making scholarly critiques of epistemic

39. Johnston, 'Racism and Security Dilemmas'.

whiteness. This triad-logic allows for empirical scrutiny beyond dyadic contexts for epistemic whiteness within global IR knowledge production.

Epistemic Whiteness in Chinese IR?

The Logic of Existence

Across all three epistemological sites, Chinese IR scholarship has produced the least amount of relevant content on the question of existence. Among a limited amount of works, there is a clear objection of dichotomy in their conceptualizations of China-Africa interactions. Some propose innovative conceptions of ontology of China-Africa interactions through relationalism. That said, the strength of critique is compromised by the inadvertent reinforcement of a powerful West versus victimized Africa dichotomy.

Academic discourses similarly foreground the historical commonality between China and Africa, for example, emphasizing that they share ‘glowing [ancient] civilizations(灿烂的文明), . . . history of humiliation [due to colonial subjugation], . . . and the experiences of struggling for national independence’.⁴⁰ Another article underlines the *common-surability* (共通性) of traditional Chinese and African cultures, that is, a shared emphasis on the harmony between mankind and nature, a priority of affection and human bonds over rationality and laws (the latter associated with the Western culture), collectivist and family values, as well as a longing for recognition and respect due to the shared history of underdevelopment and foreign invasion.⁴¹ Admittedly, there exists a questionable treatment of African culture as a unified, homogenous whole. However, the analytical effort in foregrounding China-Africa commonality marks a conscious departure from *dichotomy*, the first element of epistemic whiteness. Africa and China are imagined not as completely contradictory and antithetical, but rather, comparable and defined by commensurable elements.

There are obvious parallels between China’s discourses on Africa and on itself, as one major component of the latter relates to the national trauma and victimhood due to Western imperialism and colonialism since the 1840s, that is, ‘the century of national humiliation’.⁴² For example, one article⁴³ observes that China and Africa were both objectified by the Western colonial system and shared the same subordinate positionality:

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40. 李安山, ‘2018年中非合作论坛峰会展望:优势与挑战’, 当代世界, no. 7 (2018): 21. [Anshan Li, ‘Outlook for the 2018 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation: Strengths and Challenges’, *Contemporary World*, no. 7 (2018): 21.]
 41. 周海金 and 刘鸿武, ‘论文化的互通性与差异性对中非关系的影响’, 浙江社会科学, no. 6 (2011): 42–46. [Haijin Zhou and Hongwu Liu, ‘On the Influence of Cultural Interoperability and Difference on Sino-African Relations’, *Zhejiang Social Sciences*, no. 6 (2011): 42–46.]
 42. William A. Callahan, ‘Identity and Security in China: The Negative Soft Power of the China Dream’, *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (2015): 216–29; William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessimist Nation* (Oxford: OUP, 2009).
 43. 刘鸿武, ‘跨越大洋的遥远呼应——中非两大文明之历史认知与现实合作’, 国际政治研究, no. 4 (2006): 35. [Hongwu Liu, ‘The Distant Echo Across the Ocean – The Historical Cognition and Realistic Cooperation of the Two Major Civilizations of China and Africa’, *International Political Studies*, no. 4 (2006): 35.]

In modern time (近代), under the world colonial system established by the Western expansionist powers, . . . China and Africa were no longer the agents of interactions, but objects of Western subjugation, . . . they had little substantial interactions or connections among themselves, and the Sino-African interactions were mostly serving the interests of Western colonial powers through labour and slave trades, . . .⁴⁴

While critiquing that Africa was underdeveloped by the West through the slave trade, it is seldom mentioned that the slave trade, too, existed in the Chinese empire during Tang dynasty (between the 7th and 10th centuries).⁴⁵ A large quantity of enslaved labourers from abroad were brought to China, among which were three major groups. The first is the so-termed *Kunlun nu* (昆仑奴), or 'Black slaves from afar', who were either brought to China from Africa by Arabic traders, or from South and Southeast Asia through the slave trade and Tang territorial expansions.⁴⁶ The other two types are *gaoli bi* (高丽婢) and *hu ji* (胡姬), that is, 'Korean maidservants' and 'Caucasian women from various groups of Turks and Iranians'. Coincidentally, their racial origins correspond to the races of Black, Yellow and White in modern contexts. Partially shaped by the genders of these foreign slaves themselves, Whites were imagined as exotic and feminine, Koreans as submissive and feminine, whereas Blacks as valorous, loyal and masculine.⁴⁷ While perceptions of all three employ binary oppositions which define the foreign Other in opposition to the Han-Chinese Self, there was not a distinct racial hierarchy as constructed later by scientific racism. In other words, the racialization in pre-modern contexts played out differently than in the late 19th and early 20th century, the high time when Chinese intellectuals repurposed social Darwinism to modernize their nation, while formulating a re-negotiated global racial hierarchy with Blacks at its bottom.⁴⁸ This comparison implies that, due to the historical contingency, a desire for modernity informs hierarchization along racial lines.

Most innovatively, an alternative ontology is proposed to conceptualize IR through relationality.⁴⁹ It conceptualizes that the past several centuries witnessed hierarchical relations between the West and the non-West, characterized by 'Western dominance and

44. 近代以后兴起的西方扩张势力和所建立起来的世界殖民体系. . . 中和非都已经不是交往的主体, 而是西方征服的对象, 在卷入西方主导下的世界体系后开始有了间接的交往, . . . 双方没有太多的实质性交往与联系; 中非往来多为服务于西方殖民宗主国利益的劳工输送, 奴仆与苦力转运, . . .

45. Yinghong Cheng, *Discourses of Race and Rising China*, Mapping Global Racisms (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 167; Don J. Wyatt, *The Blacks of Premodern China* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 73; Susan Whitfield, *Silk, Slaves, and Stupas: Material Culture of the Silk Road* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 250.

46. Cheng, *Discourses of Race and Rising China*, 168–9.

47. Ibid., 170.

48. Dikotter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*; Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, 17–50.

49. 刘鸿武, '当代中非关系与亚非文明复兴浪潮——关于当代中非关系特殊性质及意义的若干问题', *世界经济与政治*, no. 9 (2008): 30–1. [Hongwu Liu, 'Contemporary Sino-African Relations and the Wave of Asian-African Civilization Renaissance – Several Questions on the Special Nature and Significance of Contemporary Sino-African Relations', *World Economy and Politics* 337, no. 9 (2008): 30–1.]

subjugation, during which the evolution of the world system is what has been described as “unidirectional” and characterized by “the centre dominating the periphery”⁵⁰; by contrast, Sino-African relations are marked by spontaneous, mutual civilizational communications on equal terms that are ‘multidirectional’ (多向度), occurring in a ‘egalitarian, reticulated network’ (平等网状型). A trend is thus predicated for IR to depart from hierarchical, unidirectional communication, moving towards ‘egalitarian interactions and communications among diverse world civilizations’ (世界多元文明交往与平等对话).⁵¹ Essentially, under this alternative ontology, the modern reality is mutually constituted by the indispensable participation of multiple actors in the West and non-West. Positioning China, Africa and the West within a horizontal network rather than a vertical hierarchy, this theorization further rejects *dichotomy*. African states and China are considered as equally proactive subjects capable of initiating multidirectional spontaneous interactions, actively pursuing their desired visions for IR.

On the other hand, these scholarly writings do not elaborate on the full extent of the diversity and richness of African civilizations further. Neither do they question the notion of ‘distinctness of civilizations’, which inherently presupposes an essentialist understanding of any culture as rigid and fixed and underpins the element of *dichotomy* in epistemic whiteness.

The Logic of Development

Mainland Chinese Sinophone scholarship partially rejects *linearity* by historicizing and provincializing the modern development of the West. The strength of their critiques is attenuated by a deep internalization of linear progression towards modernity, as well as by a shared belief that Africa’s modernization is driven by the exogenous inputs from China.

One major intervention is to contrast Western predatory practices in modern time against the mutually benefiting cultural exchange between China and Africa in premodern – and precolonial – times, which emerged around the seventh century (in the early years of Tang dynasty), peaking under the Arabic-Islamic world system between the 13th and 15th centuries.⁵² It details material cultural evidence of communications between Chinese civilization and Swahili civilization. Revealing the inter-connectedness among regions, it refutes an ahistorical picture of the West as the perpetual core of the modern world-making. The important historical moments are highlighted in which multi-actors exchanged their achievements and co-contributing to development around other core regions.

The Western-led modernization episodes of the world history are also provincialized, and Western-centric universalist claims contested,

50. Ibid, 30. ‘在人类经历了长达数百年西方主导和支配的所谓“单向度的”，“中心支配边缘”的世界体系演进过程...’.

51. All translations are my own, while the analysis was done in the texts’ original language (Mandarin).

52. 刘鸿武, ‘跨越大洋的遥远呼应——中非两大文明之历史认知与现实合作’, 33–5. [Liu, ‘The Distant Echo Across the Ocean’, 33–35.]

... the Eurocentric or Western-centric experiences and discursive formulation of modernity in the past centuries are a mere stage of particularity in the entire mankind's development of modernity. The progression of world history, naturally, will not terminate at the full establishment of Western civilization; rather, it will continue to progress as Asian and African civilization rejuvenate and rise.⁵³

Highlight that the Western-centric formulation of modernity is a particular historical stage, and that history is evolving, this argument historicizes the developmental achievements of the West. Underlining the non-West's progression potential and the context-contingency of modernization approaches, it also implies the non-West's development is *not* subject to that of the West.

This view clearly opposes Fukuyama's⁵⁴ end of history theory, but still views the world history as following linear progression, driven by agents' pursuit of modernity. In other words, despite the intentional attempt to provincialize European experiences of modernity, it refuses to engage in critiques of modernity as an unproblematic, attainable objective of pursuit.⁵⁵ Instead, Sino-African interactions are considered to be driven by the two entities' shared pursuit of modernity and nation-state rejuvenation, which deeply ingrain 'the consistent efforts and yearnings of people from the non-Western world in pursuing modern development'.⁵⁶

As such, this intervention exhibits a simultaneous provincialization of European modern attainments combined with a fascination with linear progression towards modernity, which are somewhat contradictory. This reflects a broader trend among Chinese intellectuals of an internalization of modernity as history's endpoint, a deeply Eurocentric construct from Enlightenment History by Hegel.⁵⁷ Intertwined with social Darwinism, it

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53. 刘鸿武, '当代中非关系与亚非文明复兴浪潮——关于当代中非关系特殊性质及意义的若干问题', 30–1. [Liu, 'Contemporary Sino-African Relations and the Wave of Asian-African Civilization Renaissance', 30–1.] '但它却昭示出过去数百年间以欧洲或西方国家为中心的现代性的经验与话语过程, 终究只会是整个人类现代性发展的一个特殊阶段。世界历史发展的进程, 自然不会终结于西方文明的兴起与完成, 它会随着亚非文明的复兴与崛起而继续向前推进。'.
 54. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London; New York, NY; Toronto, ON; Dublin; Melbourne, VIC; New Delhi; Auckland; Parktown North: Penguin Books Ltd, 2012).
 55. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*; Martin Heidegger, *What Is a thing?* Gateway ed. (South Bend, IN, 1979).
 56. 刘鸿武, '中非合作40年:观察中国与外部世界变化的特殊窗口', 国际论坛 21, no. 2 (2019): 28. [Hongwu Liu, '40 Years of China-Africa Cooperation: A Special Window to Observe Changes in China and the Outside World', *International Forum* 21, no. 2 (2019): 28.]; 刘鸿武, '当代中非关系与亚非文明复兴浪潮——关于当代中非关系特殊性质及意义的若干问题', 30. [Liu, 'Contemporary Sino-African Relations and the Wave of Asian-African Civilization Renaissance', 30.] '20世纪以来非西方世界的人民寻求现代发展的持久的努力与愿望。'.
 57. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York, NY: Dover Publications, 1956). Available at: <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/description/dover032/57000401.html>.

later heavily influenced early modern Chinese intellectuals and reformists' worldviews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁵⁸ In fact, not only modernity has been embraced by China with great enthusiasm as an abstract concept and an ideal (e.g. 'the four modernizations' were proposed as the state's strategic goals as early as in 1954) but also greatly localized as it has been interpreted and operationalized differently in Chinese contexts than in the Western ones.

Linearity implies that if the same, successful modernization path is followed, a certain country or region's glorious present will be another's bright future, a presumption of many modernization theories.⁵⁹ Some scholars question the applicability of the Western modernization approach in African contexts and argue for the Chinese one. One article argues that the Washington Consensus 'failed to bring development or prosperity to Africa, marked by the political instability and economic stagnations in many countries, while China made remarkable achievements under the Reform and Opening Up and modernization'.⁶⁰ It observes from African countries' initiatives of 'looking East' (drawing from Chinese experiences to modernize) that China's developmental model has immense appeal. On the other hand, however, Africa is only considered as the reliable *source* of China's energy supply, the *market* for its production (over)capacity and the *field* for Chinese enterprises to 'accumulate knowledge and experiences of globalization, . . . make them attuned to their corporate social responsibilities, and well versed into the international economic norms'.⁶¹ While acknowledging Africa's positive inputs to Chinese development in globalization, Africa is objectified as it is effectively considered as a mere field or a site where China gains practical experience or material resources from, with little agency of proactively transferring knowledge, technology or experience to China.

Historical cases of China benefitting from African capital and technology are sidelined in most discussions. In an extensive review of the technology transfer between China to African countries since the 1960s, the analytical focus is on the transfer from China to Africa, only mentioning in passing that it is a two-way traffic, since Zaire and

58. Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, 17.

59. S. N. Eisenstadt, 'Studies of Modernization and Sociological Theory', *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 13, no. 3 (1974): 225–52; Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as Ideology: American Social Science and 'Nation Building' in the Kennedy Era* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Janeen Klingler, 'A Sympathetic Appraisal of Cold War Modernization Theory', *The International History Review* 39, no. 4 (2017): 691–712.

60. 罗建波, '中国与西方国家的对非外交:在分歧中寻求共识与合作', *世界经济与政治* 334, no. 4 (2009): 32. [Jianbo Luo, 'China and Western Countries' Diplomacy Towards Africa: Seeking Consensus and Cooperation amid Differences', *World Economy and Politics*, no. 4 (2009): 32.]

61. 罗建波, '如何认识21世纪上半叶非洲在中国外交战略中的重要地位', *西亚非洲*, no. 2 (2011): 69–70. [Jianbo Luo, 'How to Conceptualize the Important Position of Africa in China's Diplomatic Strategy in the First Half of the 21st Century', *West Asia and Africa*, no. 2 (2011): 69–70.] '最后, 中国企业可以在非洲积累参与全球化的经验; 中国企业在非洲的投资过程中受到的各种批评也有利于企业完善自身的企业社会责任, 提高它们对国际经济运行规则的认知。'.

Algeria introduced new technologies and corporate management insights to China.⁶² Generally downplaying how Chinese modernization was fuelled by African inputs, the unbalanced analysis conveys a message that a more developed China can help modernize the less-developed Africa, implying *Sino-centric linearity*.

An article, titled 'Africa can borrow from Chinese governance experiences' (非洲可以借鉴中国的治理经验),⁶³ considers the Chinese developmental model as the better alternative to the Western model, questioning democracy/good governance as prerequisites in the Western model and its suitability in African contexts. Noteworthy, while this piece briefly mentions that the dialogues between China and African states on governance models should not be unidirectional, and that China has much to learn from the latter, it does not elaborate on the rationale, concrete aspects or empirical cases beyond this slogan. Chinese contributions to African modernization are demonstrated through a typology of China's three roles in Africa, as the crisis stabilizer, the post-conflict builder, and development contributor.⁶⁴ It argues that energy cooperation mobilizes the natural resources that 'Africa has no means to extract'⁶⁵ (无力开采) and translates them into capital, technology and infrastructure for African states. It reasons that the Chinese approach of exchanging infrastructure construction projects for resources is better than the Western one of simply purchasing natural resources, as the absence of monetary transaction reduces corruption in African regimes. A third piece interprets Sino-African cooperation as China's *unidirectional* provision of international public goods to Africa, observing that as China accumulates more national capabilities through modernization, its provision of public goods to Africa has been steadily growing and diversifying since its start in 1955, in contrast to the gradually declining Western provision.⁶⁶

Most recently, there is an emerging scholarly trend in Chinese academia that quantitatively measures and demonstrates China's contribution to African modernization. A few relevant articles appeared in the most prominent IR journal in Chinese academia, *World Economy and Politics*, reasoning (in line with afore-reviewed research) that African development is catalyzed through China's own modernization pursuit. One article argues

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62. 李安山 贾丁, '从坦赞铁路到蒙内铁路:中非合作中的技术转移', *International Social Science Journal(Chinese Edition)*, 33, no. 4 (2016): 171–87. [Anshan Li and Jia Ding, 'From Tanzania-Zambia Railway to Mombasa-Nairobi Railway: The Technology Transfer in China-Africa Cooperation', *International Journal of Social Sciences: Chinese Version* 33, no. 4 (2016): 171–87.]
 63. 张春, '非洲可以借鉴中国的治国理政经验', *现代国际关系*, no. 8 (2018): 4–7. [Chun Zhang, 'Africa Can Learn from China's Experience in Governance', *Modern International Relations*, no. 8 (2018): 4–7.]
 64. 张春, '中国在非洲的负责任行为研究', *西亚非洲*, no. 5 (2014): 50. [Chun Zhang, 'On China's Responsible Great Power Performance in Africa', *West Asia and Africa*, no. 5 (2014): 50.]
 65. Ibid.
 66. 张春, '国际公共产品供应视角下的中非合作', *西亚非洲*, no. 4 (2019): 73–99. [Chun Zhang, 'China-Africa Cooperation from the Perspective of International Public Goods Provision', *West Asia and Africa*, no. 4 (2019): 73–99.]

that in the 21st century, Chinese and African industrial developments have grown increasingly complementary.⁶⁷ China's industrial upgrade boosts African states' industrial manufacturing capabilities, further integrating them into the global value chain. Another article⁶⁸ examines local perceptions of the effectiveness in fostering economic development of Chinese aid to Tanzania and that of the World Bank. It observes that Chinese aid projects are perceived as more effective since they are more tailored to African society's demands for tangible economic well-being. These empirically grounded works further consolidate an understanding that African modernization is driven by China.

Writings by varied scholars above reflect a common trend in the academia – yearning for modernity has clearly embossed on Chinese intellectuals' worldviews, heavily shaping and conditioning their criticality and reflexivity towards 'the international as enlightened'. They share the consensus that, while the approach to modernization is context-contingent, China, Africa, and the West share the pursuit of modernity as the ultimate developmental goal. This implies that Africa should modernize along China's path. Furthermore, they reflect a broader, present trend in Chinese academia that the Chinese modernization style is more superior and moral than the Western one, echoing with the consensus among Chinese intellectuals at the turn of the 20th century.⁶⁹ While this can be seen as an opposition to Western-centric linearity in some way, it also implies that the momentum for Africa's modernization is exogenous, powered by Chinese industrialization achievements and knowledge dissemination. Rarely, if ever, have these works entertained the possibility of Africa achieving endogenous development, without relying on inputs from China or the West. They are short in elaborating on how exactly African actors have actively co-constituted the modern world order with their active contribution and their agency of searching for their own modernization path in an endogenous manner. While the modernization drive for Africa needs to come from China, the modernization of China is assumed to be self-generated, given the scarcity of discussions on China's modernization as driven by varied external inputs of foreign capital, technology and experts.

The UCD theory underlines the interactions and inter-relatedness of unevenly developed entities and regions in co-constituting and co-driving global development.⁷⁰ Understood in relation to UCD, Chinese scholarly discourses most visibly lack

67. 郑宇, '全球化, 工业化与经济追赶', 世界经济与政治, no. 11 (2019): 105–28 + 159–60. [Yu Zheng, 'Globalization, Industrialization and Economic Catch-Up', *World Economy and Politics*, no. 11 (2019): 105–28 + 159–60.]

68. 黄振乾, '中国援助项目对当地经济发展的影响——以坦桑尼亚为个案的考察', 世界经济与政治, no. 8 (2019): 127–53 + 159–60. [Zhenqian Huang, 'Local Economics Effects of Chinese Aid Projects: The Case of Tanzania', *World Economy and Politics*, no. 8 (2019): 127–53.]

69. Rebecca E. Karl, *Staging the World: Chinese Nationalism at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2002).

70. Rosenberg et al., 'Debating Uneven and Combined Development/Debating International Relations'.

appreciation for the non-linear conceptualization of global history. The majority of Chinese IR scholarship also underexplores the inter-relatedness among entities as in co-constituting the modern world. While much has been written on Africa's developmental prospect, rarely, if ever, these works engage in serious analytical discussions on the possibility of Africa societies achieving non-linear development, for example, directly arriving at a much more advanced developmental phase by drawing from other regions' development. This is surprising, given how much the People's Republic of China [PRC] own communist revolution trajectory drew from Russian revolution experiences based on the idea of combined and uneven development, which illustrates it is not always necessary to strictly follow a linear trajectory.⁷¹ This further underlines a notion of Sino-centric linearity while rejecting the Western-centric epistemic whiteness.

The Logic of Resistance

Chinese IR scholarship unanimously critiques the West's exploitation and subjugation of Africa both in colonial and post-colonial times, attributing the latter's underdevelopment to the former. Albeit rare, there are also insightful attempts of theorizing the political agency of African states and Sino-African post-colonial solidarity. However, most works foreground the contrasting positionality between Africa and the West, as the powerless victim versus the mighty perpetrator. On their critiques of the micro-foundation of the global racial hierarchy through everyday racism, the majority of Chinese IR scholarship only problematizes anti-Black racism as racial and cultural ignorance at *the individual level*. Existing works rarely tackle the underlying ideational dynamics inductive of racism, for example, the curious entanglement of social Darwinism legacies and a post-colonial yearning for modernization. Consequently, academic discussions on resistance against racism are absent.

Many critique that the West's advanced position in the modern world was enacted through exploitation (a process in which the West also underdeveloped Africa, borrowing Rodney's⁷² terms) and later secured by their domineering role at its core. Critiques like this reflect a consensus among Chinese IR scholars, since others similarly emphasize the lineage between predatory colonial exploitation and post-independence subjugation of Africa. For example, it has been rightfully revealed that the making of the modern world is centred around racial injustices and exploitation.⁷³ In particular, the underdevelopment of Africa is due to the intensity and extent of foreign intervention, characterized by slave trade, chronological colonial rule and post-independence external interference from the West.⁷⁴ Another article argues that the US post-Cold War foreign aids to Africa

71. Max Shachtman, 'Introduction', in *Problems of Chinese Revolution*, ed. Leon Trotsky (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

72. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Verso Books, 2018).

73. 张忠祥, '试析中国对非洲外交中的不干涉内政原则', 西亚非洲, no. 1 (2010): 13. [Zhongxiang Zhang, 'An Analysis of China's Non-Interference Principle in African Diplomacy', *West Asia and Africa*, no. 1 (2010): 13.]

74. Ibid.

are mostly motivated by strategic goals of political interests and energy security, which explains why United States aid concentrates on countries with rich resources, neglecting those with few resources or heavy debts and are in greater need of foreign aid.⁷⁵ It underlines the hypocrisy of Western states,⁷⁶

Foreign aid also serves the national and global interests of Western countries, reflecting their foreign policy orientation, strategic intentions and values . . . During the Cold War, the United States competed with the Soviet Union for the Third World countries; it provided economic assistance to even the most corrupt and brutal regimes, such as the Mobutu regime in Zaire. . .⁷⁷

Likewise, through the cases of Niger and Côte d'Ivoire, scholars argue that the Western dominance in Africa did not cease after African states' independence through the erosion of the sovereignty of African states.⁷⁸ One of the examples being that independence-minded African leaders have been assassinated, overthrown after coups and exiled since national independence.

These writings commonly foreground the political positionality between the West and Africa (albeit both homogenously perceived) in contrasting, dichotomous terms. They portray the West as the self-centred donor, the aggressive entrepreneur and the imperial perpetrator, whereas Africa as the wanting aid recipient, the miserably exploited and the post-colonial victim. While this exposes the imperial nature of post-colonial IR realities, it reinforces the racialized dichotomy of a powerfully perpetrating West and an agency-less, victimized Africa, because there lacks meaningful, further elaboration on African agency to resist these injustices in their analysis.

Most insightfully, another publication offers an interpretation of the Angola model (i.e. Angola's exchange of natural resources for China's financing of infrastructure projects) through the agency perspective. It considers the model as 'an agreement achieved under the frameworks of two national governments, which is an opposition and resistance (对抗) against the Western-dominated global liberal capitalist market logic in itself'.⁷⁹ It underlines the *de jure* equal status of China and Angola as two fully sovereign countries, and that they have full agency to make political-economic arrangements for themselves. With an optimistic tone, the structural preponderance of international class hierarchies is challenged, by focusing on resistance at the agent level, thereby touching upon the agency and emancipation potentials of non-Western states.

75. 罗建波, '西方对非援助效果及中非经济合作', 国际政治科学, no. 1 (2013): 13. [Luo, 'The Effect of Western Aid to Africa and China-Africa Economic Cooperation', *Quarterly Journal of International Politics*, no. 1 (2013): 13.]
76. 罗, '西方对非援助效果及中非经济合作', 12. [Luo, 'The Effect of Western Aid to Africa and China-Africa Economic Cooperation', 12.]
77. 对外援助同时又是为西方国家的国家利益和全球利益服务, 反映的是西方国家的对外政策取向, 战略意图和价值观念. . . 冷战时期 美国同苏联争夺第三世界国家; 对即使是最腐败 最残暴的政权也提供经济援助, 比如扎伊尔的蒙博托政权. . .
78. 李安山 贾丁, '从坦赞铁路到蒙内铁路:中非合作中的技术转移', 172. [Li and Jia, 'From Tanzania-Zambia Railway to Mombasa-Nairobi Railway', 172.]
79. 刘海方, '跨越分野:开放社会科学视野下的中非关系研究', 世界经济与政治, no. 9 (2008): 50. [Liu, 'Crossing the Divide', 50.] '安哥拉模式, 作为两国政府间框架之下的协议, 本身就是对于西方主导的所谓全球自由资本市场逻辑的对抗; . . .'

This interpretation of economic cooperation through the agency perspective breaks away from the cliché debate of whether Chinese modernization experiences or Western ones are better suited to African contexts. The said debate not only objectifies Africa as a mere field of Sino-Western ideological competition, revealing a sense of strategic anxiety,⁸⁰ but, more importantly, conceptually strips African states of their agency in deciding on their developmental plans, paths and partners.

Furthermore, acknowledging that the global racial hierarchy is consolidated by the global capitalist system through a neoliberal logic,⁸¹ collaborative resistance from the non-West is called for. This interpretation thus eloquently reiterates the possibility of post-colonial solidarity of resistance. Yet, in its current formulation, the positionality of China and Africa differ significantly in the global capitalist system, as 'Africa has been demoted to the Fourth World in the globalization system, whereas China has grown into the engine of global economy'.⁸² Africa is seen as the victim of Western exploitation, juxtaposed with China, the agential *driving force* of greater global integration. A noticeable tension thus exists between the political agency of Angola and China that are *on par* in negotiating economic agreements and resisting Western dominance, and their differentiated economic agency due to their distinct optionality in the global economic system.

Scholarly critiques of everyday racism as the micro-foundations of IR are another site for critical examination of epistemic whiteness. Some attribute Chinese racism against Africans to cultural ignorance and *certain individuals'* national chauvinism,

Due to the impact of modernization and commercialization, the good old [cultural] traditions of Chinese and African nations are being challenged and fading away . . . Take Chinese companies in Africa as an example, some companies are dishonest and do not fulfil legal obligations. . . Some Chinese in Africa have national chauvinism and discriminate against Black people, . . . showing extreme contempt to Africans. . . Moreover, Chinese people are generally unreligious, . . . finding some religious rituals and practices of Africans exaggerated and incredible. Therefore, the most common phenomenon is that many Chinese people in Africa do not have an adequate understanding of local culture and customs, not respecting African traditions and behaviours enough. . .⁸³

80. Hirono and Suzuki, 'Why Do We Need "Myth-Busting" in the Study of Sino-African Relations?'

81. Chang, *Bad Samaritans*.

82. Liu, 'Crossing the Divide', 50. '... 已经在全球化体系中沦为/第四世界的非洲, 还是已经成为全球经济发动机的中国. . . '.

83. 周 and 刘, '论文化的互通性与差异性对中非关系的影响', 47. [Zhou and Liu, 'On the Influence of Cultural Interoperability and Difference on Sino-African Relations', 47.] '由于现代化和商业化的冲击, 中非优良的民族传统正经受着挑战, 甚至在某些领域正日益缺失。以中国在非企业为例, 有些中国公司法律观念淡薄, 不遵守所在国的法律法规, 不守诚信, 从而遭到当地政府和人民的反感。有的在非中国人存在自大的民族沙文主义, 对黑人抱有歧视的态度, 甚至以“黑鬼”相称, 表现出对非洲人的极大蔑视。还比如, 中国人宗教观念淡漠, 而非洲人不但有浓厚的宗教情怀, 其部分宗教仪式和宗教行为在中国人看来也非常夸张和不可思议。因此最普遍的现象是很多在非中国人对当地的文化和习俗不够了解, 对黑人的传统和行为不够尊重, 从而在工作 and 日常生活中与当地人产生摩擦和冲突。'.

There appears to be little reflection of the global racial hierarchy and its local ramifications among Chinese agents, which were deeply intertwined with China's revolutionary and reformist agendas in the early 20th century. Furthermore, there is an implied notion that racism is almost a capitalist, developmental sin, as it is 'the impact of modernization and commercialization' that leads to the waning of 'the good old cultural tradition'.⁸⁴ This idea risks reducing the racial inequality to class factors and is analytically unhelpful.⁸⁵

The mainstream of Chinese IR discourses on Sino-African relations largely embraces this cultural ignorance thesis, commonly refusing to dive deeper into the underlying ideational structure of racism. One article problematizes a paradox that despite the extensive economic and cultural exchanges among China and African countries, Chinese people do not know much about Africa, even after the first Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing in 2006.⁸⁶ Illustrating with public polling data, it shows that many Chinese harbour partial (片面) impressions and discriminative stereotypes of Africa, characterized by 'poor and underdeveloped', 'AIDS' and 'hunger', 'primitive-ness', 'wars and conflicts-ridden', followed by more positive labels such as 'friendly', 'enthusiastic' and 'energetic'.⁸⁷ However, instead of exploring the institutional or societal dynamics underlying these stereotypes, its analysis stops short at the individual level and attributes this to *some* Chinese people's *lack* of understanding.

One of the most severe incidents exemplary of everyday racism is probably the anti-Black protests in major Chinese cities of Tianjin and Nanjing targeting African students in the late 1980s. One of the protests occurred after a Chinese campus guard confronted two African students at Hohai University when the latter tried to invite Chinese females to their dormitories on Christmas Eve, evolving into a physical conflict and massive protests among Chinese public afterwards and leading to foreign governments evacuating African students.⁸⁸

Echoing with the cultural ignorance thesis, Chinese academic discourses deny the racist nature of these protests.⁸⁹ The trigger of these protests was interpreted as 'the

84. Ibid.

85. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*.

86. 李安山, '非洲专刊 前言', 国际社会科学杂志: 中文版, no. 4 (2016): 16–18. [Anshan Li, 'Foreword to the Special Issue on Africa', *International Social Science Journal: Chinese Edition*, no. 4 (2014): 16–18.]

87. Ibid., 16.

88. AP, 'New Anti-Black Rally in China', *New York Times*, 28 December 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/12/28/world/new-anti-black-rally-in-china.html>; Yinghong Cheng, 'The Anti-Black Movement on Campus in the 1980s: Pondering on Racism in China', *Direction*, 2009. Available at: <http://www.chinainperspective.com/ArtShow.aspx?AID=4057>.

89. 李安山, '中非合作的基础: 民间交往的历史、成就与特点', 西亚非洲, no. 3 (2015): 58. [Anshan Li, 'Foundations of China-Africa Cooperation: History, Achievements and Characteristics of Civil Society Contacts', *West Asia and Africa*, no. 3 (2015): 58.]

unfamiliarity or resentment of Chinese people with African male students' being intimate with Chinese female youths, . . . a natural phenomenon for people with different values'.⁹⁰ Words like 'unfamiliarity' and 'a natural phenomenon' downplay the severe extent of the racist hatred shown during the protests, especially given the hateful slogans such as 'Down with the "Black Devils"' (打倒黑鬼) used.⁹¹ This cultural ignorance thesis does not critique the underlying gendered racial anxiety about African masculinities threatening Chinese ones either – after all, it was African *male* students in romantic relationships with Chinese *women* that were targeted.

Discussions along this line mirror the ongoing academic debate (both in Chinese and international academia) on whether racism underlies China's interactions with Africa. Many seem to agree that racialization, rather than racism, better captures Chinese racialized subject-positioning vis-à-vis Africa. It is argued that the lack of racial learning contributes to racism against Black Africans in China; Chinese (problematic ways of) racialization of Africans is attributed to the persistent white supremacy and Western racial ideology in popular media.⁹² Similarly, a distinction between racism and the ignorance of race is made.⁹³ Others arrive at the same conclusion by historicizing racism, illustrating that since there was no record of institutional racism in China, critiques of Chinese Afrophobia and anti-black racism 'runs the risk of equating the experiences of black people in China with the institutionalized violence against people of colour and indigenous people in the American continent and elsewhere'.⁹⁴ Admittedly, the institutionalized violence and racial injustice that combined slavery and colonialism in Western Europe and North America are categorically different from xenophobia and cultural racism in other contexts, equating the two risks trivializing the former.⁹⁵ Nonetheless, racism can be present across different cultural, political and historical contexts, and can exist separately from racialized dispossessions, enslavement and extractive exploitation in European-American colonialism. Under-acknowledgement of racism reveals a certain degree of *denialism*.

Others disagree and argue that 'anti-African racism reflected the mindset of Chinese educated elites and students who regarded Africans as racially inferior yet were upset by China's own lack of modernization'.⁹⁶ For them, the anti-Black protests on Chinese

90. Ibid. '冲突的导火索缘于中国民众包括学生对非洲男留学生和中国女青年亲密关系的不习惯甚至反感'.

91. Yinghong Cheng, 'From Campus Racism to Cyber Racism: Discourse of Race and Chinese Nationalism', *The China Quarterly* 207 (2011): 563.

92. 'The Shifting Meanings of Race in China: A Case Study of the African Diaspora Communities in Guangzhou', *City & Society* 28, no. 3 (2016): 298–318.

93. 'Ignorance of Race Not Equivalent to Racism', *From Africa to China*, 2016. Available at: <https://fromafricatochina.com/2016/06/18/opinion-%e6%9d%8e%e5%ae%89%e5%b1%b1%ef%bc%9aignorance-of-race-not-equivalent-to-racism/>.

94. Roberto Castillo, "'Race" and "Racism" in Contemporary Africa-China Relations Research: Approaches, Controversies and Reflections', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 21, no. 3 (2020): 239.

95. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

96. Cheng, 'From Campus Racism to Cyber Racism', 561.

campuses in the 1980s reveal the resentment of Chinese intellectuals (and students alike) against PRC's foreign aid policies in the high socialist years, which 'had wasted China's resources, [made China] all[y] with backward nations and scarified their own people's – especially intellectuals' – material benefits'.⁹⁷ This resentment is then associated with 'the social Darwinist global racial hierarchy', formulated first among Chinese late Qing reformers such as Yan Fu, Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei at the turn of 20th century, who illustrated that the White and Yellow races are superior to other races, with Blacks as the most inferior one.⁹⁸

While I agree with the view that China's valorization and yearning for modernization – shaped and modified by the global racial hierarchy – fuel its domestic racism against African people,⁹⁹ I question the attribution of racism to a loosely defined, un-refined use of the term 'social Darwinism'. Admittedly, social Darwinism can be traced in the Chinese society today.¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, I disagree with the static view among existing research that social Darwinism has been persistently dominant in China¹⁰¹ or that what we see is a mere reproduction of white supremacy.¹⁰² This underexplores how the traction of social Darwinism fluctuates as the political and societal landscape changed across PRC history but also negates the post-colonial agency (which is *not* necessarily anti-racist) of instrumentally adopting prevalent international socio-political thoughts for the sake of advancing their own development and negotiating their own positionality in the global racial hierarchy. For example, the first two decades of PRC history witnessed systematic, officially mandated efforts to foreground Afro-Sino solidarity through pro-African and pro-Black discourses, both through propaganda campaigns targeting international and domestic audiences¹⁰³ and in Mao Zedong's own foreign policy rhetoric. A pertinent example is Mao's conversation with the Youth Delegation of sub-Saharan Africa,

97. Ibid., 564.

98. Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*; Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*, 17–50; Cheng, 'From Campus Racism to Cyber Racism'.

99. Cheng, *Discourses of Race and Rising China*; "'Is Peking Man Still Our Ancestor?'" – Genetics, Anthropology, and the Politics of Racial Nationalism in China', *The Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no. 3 (2017): 575–602; 'From Campus Racism to Cyber Racism'.

100. M. Dujon Johnson, *Race and Racism in the Chinas: Chinese Racial Attitudes Toward Africans and African-Americans* (Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2007); Binxin Zhang, 'Africans in China, Western/White Supremacy and the Ambivalence of Chinese Racial Identity', *The China Quarterly* 15 (2024): 1–16; Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

101. Frank Dikötter, *The Discourse of Race in Modern China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Cheng, *Discourses of Race and Rising China*.

102. Zhang, 'Africans in China, Western/White Supremacy and the Ambivalence of Chinese Racial Identity'.

103. Stefan Landsberger, *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization: From Revolution to Modernization* (Routledge: Abingdon-on-Thames, 2020); Melissa Lefkowitz, 'Revolutionary friendship: Representing Africa During the Mao Era', pp. 29–50. In Batchelor, Kathryn, and Xiaoling Zhang, eds. *China-Africa Relations: Building Images Through Cultural Co-operation, Media Representation, and Communication*. London: Taylor & Francis, 2017. *China-Africa Relations* (Routledge, 2017); Ignatius G. D. Suglo, 'Visualizing Africa in Chinese Propaganda Posters 1950–1980', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 57, no. 3 (2022): 574–91.

Western imperialists consider themselves to be civilized and call the oppressed barbarous. However, . . . it is Europe that has occupied Africa. Can this be called civilized? Europe is inferior to Africa; it occupies other people's territory. . . . [W]e have always been civilized, and so have you. . . . The imperialists are prone to castigate us as being dirty, unclean, and unhygienic. I don't think this is necessarily correct. We are cleaner. We must have self-confidence and despise European and American imperialism.¹⁰⁴

Furthermore, Chinese foreign aid policies to Africa underwent a drastic change. Compared to Mao's early years, aid to Africa since Deng Xiaoping's leadership were significantly downplayed, remolded by cost-benefit calculations.¹⁰⁵ In fact, ideas purporting this change might have been already underway in late Mao's times. Mao's sudden decision to seek rapprochement with the United States and his 'the three worlds theory' of imagining international hierarchies in developmentalist terms already indicated the pivot of the focus of China's foreign relations from the developing Global South to the more developed world.¹⁰⁶

While I do not fully agree that anti-Black racism in China is fueled by social Darwinism, this interpretation nonetheless inspired some crucial observations. Chinese intellectuals regularly display a tendency of instrumentally using racist discourses to rally popular support for their political campaigns – as it was for the purpose to launch a reform against the Imperial Qing in the 1890s and for the goal of democratizing China in the 1990s. In both instances, the widely shared desire for modernization fuels Chinese racism against Africans. As long as Chinese worldview is based upon an underlying linear notion of historical progression towards modernity, topped with the internalization of an international hierarchy where states' positionality is marked by their modernization progress, China's gendered and racialized imagination of Africa would consistently be governed by the same modernity logic.

In summary, as a general pattern, mainland Chinese scholarly works fail to systematically critique the global racial hierarchy or to reflect upon the desire for modernity in provoking racism. Inasmuch as the racism is excused as individual acts and exceptional cases, there logically follows no urgency of resistance.

Conclusion

Echoing with Duara's¹⁰⁷ observations of early modern China, this article reveals that, almost a century later, there is an (arguably much less critical) appraisal and internalized

104. Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong on Diplomacy* (Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 1998), 248.

105. Ian Taylor, 'China's Foreign Policy Towards Africa in the 1990s', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 36, no. 3 (1998): 443–60; Taylor, 'China's Relations with Sub-Saharan Africa in the Post-Maoist Era, 1978–1999'; Lixia Tang, *How to Understand China's Foreign Aid* (The Paper Institute, 2018). Available at: https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_2410182.

106. Chen Jian, 'China and the Cold War after Mao', in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War: Volume 3: Endings*, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 181–200.

107. Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation*.

appreciation of modernity as the endgame of history among Chinese intellectuals. Under the heavy influence of this modernist worldview, these Chinese intellectuals contest the Western-centric version of *the international as SES*. Meanwhile, Chinese IR scholarship exhibits a Sino-centric version of SES, similarly shown through problems of *dichotomy*, *linearity* and *denialism*. Specifically, *Chinese academic discourses* re-centre the positive role, the agency and moral superiority of China in the modern world-making while only partially acknowledging those of African countries. This is certainly not to say that it is a problem only seen in Chinese IR scholarship, nor to suggest that these scholarly works reviewed here are solely responsible. Rather, Chinese IR works on Sino-African relations should be considered as a typical case of the wider international academia/s, where SES is adapted, negotiated or contested.

This article offers a non-dichotomous framework to critically examine epistemic practices, calling for IR communities to engage seriously with epistemic justice. Beyond academic activism, this framework points towards a more analytically sound theorization of global development and a more accurate representation of global history. Transcending SES and its implicated problems of dichotomy, linearity and denialism brings us an emphasis on relationism, non-linearity and reconciliation, which should be fully embraced to generate global IR theories that are more epistemically sound and ethical. A few afore-reviewed works offer some early-stage but inspiring conceptualizations of China and Africa's role in co-shaping global development through a relational, network-centred ontology. This idea, once developed further, can potentially offer insights on the ontological assumptions of IR, contributing further to academic discussions of UCD and relationality, especially by annotating the exact ways in which entities interact with one another to produce 'the international' that we are in today.

The empirical analysis raises a thought-provoking question. Does post-colonial IR need a new term other than epistemic whiteness to critique knowledge-building in global IR? Afterall, whiteness relates to the constructed subject-positioning of being 'white'. While the analytical framework of *dichotomy*, *linearity* and *denialism* proves useful to critique global IR scholarship, the term 'epistemic whiteness' cannot capture the full dynamics. What Chinese IR scholarship displays is not an internalization of whiteness per se. Loosening up the boundary of 'whiteness' to include 'Chinese-ness' would just invalidate the term itself. This article proposes an alternative term, that is, 'the international as SES', instead of epistemic whiteness, racism or Westerncentrism, as a better umbrella term to capture the problems of *dichotomy*, *linearity* and *denialism* in knowledge-building.

I also argue that *dichotomy*, *linearity* and *denialism* in IR knowledge production cannot be adequately problematized without interrogating the modernist worldviews that structures scholarly imaginations of global development and the modern world. If modernist worldviews are indeed central to the non-Western centric knowledge production, then it can be true that IR is not trapped in the prison of Political Science, but one of colonial modernity.¹⁰⁸ This suggests that, while the UCD theory offers an inspiring reading of

108. Rosenberg, 'International Relations in the Prison of Political Science'; Blaney and Tickner, 'International Relations in the Prison of Colonial Modernity'.

global development, it is insufficient as the sole meta-theory of ‘the international’ and needs to be combined with other intellectual tools, such as ‘the international as singular, enlightened, and sanitized’, for IR theories to re-vamp itself.

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