Love NBA, Hate BLM: Racism in China's Sports Fandom

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This article aims to explore how racism plays out in China's sports fandom in the wake of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement sweeping across the globe. To this end, we conducted a case study of basketball fans' postings on the most popular Chinese-language sports fandom platform, Hupu. The research discovered that the often-negative assessments of the BLM movement posted on Hupu were largely informed by racism deeply held in traditional Chinese thinking, which provided the grounding for Chinese sports fans to appropriate racial discourses to assess progressive equal-rights politics in Euro-American societies. The trajectory of such a discursive practice was twofold, enabling these sports fans to rationalize their political views pertaining to both international and domestic arenas. The research findings urge scholarly attention to the dynamic interplay between regional popular cultures and global equal-rights politics in the digital age in China and beyond.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter (BLM), China, Hupu, Lebron James, NBA, racism, sports fandom

"User 3: I admire Old J (老詹) and like watching the NBA, but this does not change the fact that I am annoyed by the Blacks living in China" (User 3, as cited in Hupu, 2020a, n.p.).

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The above commentary, upvoted over 1,000 times, was posted by a basketball fan on the Chinese-language digital sports fandom platform, Hupu. The racist commentary was posted against the backdrop of the year 2020, which was marked not only by the COVID-19 pandemic but also by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The BLM movement was initially triggered by the shooting of a young Black man, George Zimmerman, in the United States in 2012 (Mourao & Kilgo, 2021). After the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor caused by severe police misconduct in 2020, the momentum of this equal-rights movement reached its peak, prompting global public attention to issues concerning structural racial inequalities (Illas, 2020). Certainly, the BLM movement has never received cross-partisan support in any country, with the violence caused by opportunists in street protests being exploited by right-wing groups to criticize the liberal leftists in American domestic politics (Phelps & Hamilton, 2022). Yet, it is still shocking to see such blatant, racist commentary being well received in China's basketball fandom.

Traces of racism could be found in ancient Chinese history, but it was arguably the spread of pseudo-scientific knowledge of race in the late 19th century that encouraged anti-Black sentiments to grow in the country (Lan, 2016). Since the late 1970s, such sentiments have become politically tolerated, as the Chinese government's ambition to modernize the nation by emulating Western civilization has marginalized the discourse of Africa as its international alliance (Johnson, 2007). However, racism rarely entered mainstream public debates in Chinese society. It was not until 2020 that the BLM movement brought racial issues to the forefront of the world stage (Illas, 2020), with NBA athletes' active participation in the initiative having offered Chinese basketball fans opportunities to reflect on racial politics. Considering that most elite NBA athletes are from the Black community, one might expect to see the BLM movement being supported by their Chinese fans. Yet, the extensive endorsement for the racist commentary quoted above reveals more complex dynamics in China's sports fandom.

Drawing on critical discourse analysis (CDA), with the assistance of content analysis (CA), we explore the intersection of racial politics and sports fandom on the Chinese-language Internet, using Hupu users' BLM-related postings as a case study. We argue that Chinese racial discourses are rooted in Chinese traditions and influenced by the current rise of nationalism, which reiterates the Han ethnic majority's ownership of the nation. The widespread penetration of such racial discourses not only provides fertile ground for racism to proliferate but also facilitates subtextual political commentating concerning Euro-American equal-rights initiatives on the Chinese-language Internet (Liu & Deng, 2020; Liu, Xu, & Chen, 2021; Pfafman, Carpenter, & Tang, 2015). In this sense, the anti-Black sentiments unfolding on Hupu reflect both the nationalist essence of China's sports fandom and its intersection with socio-political issues in Chinese society.

Literature Review

Understanding China's Sports Fandom

Contemporary fandom studies scholarship often conceptualizes sport as a space in which fans' identity construction and consumption choices are facilitated (Crawford, 2004). It considers today's sports fans as consumers, whose behaviors are dramatically different from that of previous-generation spectators, which were conditioned by their locality and class (Dixon, 2016). Such an account articulates how contemporary sport becomes a site of "open" and ongoing cultural struggle, which is appropriated by fans

across the globe to reflect on their socio-economic positions (Sandvoss, 2003). Traditional fandom studies are Eurocentric, but recent scholarly attention has been paid to Chinese fans' reflective readings of international sports content (Gong, 2017; Shen, Yan, Ye Haobin, & Yan, 2021; Zhang, 2014). Unlike previous-generation Chinese spectators, whose experience of watching games was directly engineered by the state's nationalist politics (Sullivan, Chadwick, & Gow, 2019), contemporary Chinese fans' consumption of popular sports often relies on high-quality content imported from abroad (Gong, 2020). The National Basketball Association (NBA) and European countries' football leagues are front runners, and both have developed huge fan bases in China (Cha & Lim, 2019; Shen et al., 2021). This is especially the case for the NBA, thanks to the top Chinese player, Yao Ming's extremely successful career in the league. According to the NBA's marketing research report, over four-fifths of young Chinese men aged between 15 and 24 now consider themselves loyal NBA fans, with almost half of them claiming that basketball is their favorite sport (Zhou et al., 2017). While watching professional games, these digital-savvy sports spectators also actively use social media platforms to organize fandom groups (Billings, Broussard, Xu, & Xu, 2019; Shen et al., 2021), where new interpretations of mediated sports content are generated. In this process, their reflective readings of sport become a vehicle to engage with trending socio-political issues, which often go beyond the scope of sport per se. In recent years, the intersection of sport and politics is most tellingly reflected in such cases as the call for boycotting the NBA, in the aftermath of the former Houston Rockets general manager openly supporting the 2019 Hong Kong pro-democratic protests (Cha & Lim, 2019).

Scholarly accounts of Chinese fans' reflective sports consumption mainly address issues concerning gender or state politics (Chan, 2022; Lee, 2009; Shen et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2019; Xu & Kreshel, 2020). Critical analyses of China's sports fandom through the lens of race are still scarce. Western experience shows that sport has historically been used by both athletes and spectators to advance equal-rights political agendas (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Dickerson, 2016). The latest statistics suggest that three-fourths of NBA players are African Americans, with superstars in the league usually coming from this ethnic background (Statista, 2021). The consumption of NBA games brings representations of Blacks to the forefront of the Chinese sports spectatorship. After George Floyd's death in May 2020, the influence of the BLM movement reached a global scale, and almost all NBA players voiced their support for the long-existing equal-rights initiative (Hill, 2020). This seems to provide the potential for sparking pro-BLM momentum in China. However, both Yuan Gong's (2017) analysis of female Chinese fans' gaze on elite European footballers and Charlie Zhang's (2014) examination of Chinese spectators' rationalization of African track-and-field professionals' sporting talent have both collaterally touched on how foreign athletes are racialized in China's sports fandom. Their prior findings, alongside the extensively upvoted anti-Black commentary quoted at the beginning of the article, reveal the deeply racist nature of Chinese sports fandom culture.

Contextualizing Chinese Racial Discourses

It is shocking but not at all surprising to see racism being a defining characteristic of China's sports fandom. As James Leibold (2010) notes, racism is rooted in traditional Chinese culture, manifesting itself as Han supremacism, which is built on a narrative of Chinese history solely highlighting the experience and perspective of the country's Han ethnic majority. Since the middle of the 19th century, Chinese racial discourses gradually converged with "scientific" observations of human bodies (Cheng, 2011). Running parallel to the development of Western anthropology during the same period, these discourses started to

incorporate a biological myth of race, which classifies people into five types, including Whites, Blacks, Browns, Reds, as well as Yellows, to which Chinese people belong (Yoshihiro, 2003). The racial classification promotes a localized hierarchical order, which defines the White and the Yellow as "strong and intelligent" and others as "feeble and stupid," with the Blacks being portrayed as the "most inferior human race […] living a primitive, unimaginative and slavish life" (Cheng, 2011, p. 563).

The "scientific" classification of race that emerged in the late 19th century has notable contemporary relevance. Masked with a scientific veneer, the racial classification has encouraged many Chinese scholars to continue pursuing the "East-Asian-Origin-of-Modern-Chinese-Humans" theory, despite the "Out-of-Africa" hypothesis being largely endorsed by recent genetic research findings (Z. Fang, 2007). Behind the scenes, it is the CCP's post-reform propaganda, which marginalizes the past portrayal of African nations as its Third-World alliance and highlights the need to emulate White Western civilization in its modern nation-building project, that has legitimized an association between the Black community and backwardness in popular discourses (Johnson, 2007). This political climate comes against the backdrop of Western consumer goods and cultural products being imported to China, which has simultaneously perpetuated Eurocentric racial stereotypes in its popular cultures (Pfafman et al., 2015). Together, they offer the discursive grounding for racism against Blacks to proliferate in China's public sphere today.

Different from that in major Western democracies, racism enjoys cross-partisan support in China's political spectrum. This is because racial discourses have various functionalities, which facilitate both pro-CCP camps and their opponents' political agendas. For Chinese people in favor of the current administration, racial discourses serve as an ideological tool to argue against the practice of Western-style democracy in the country. As Yinghong Cheng (2011) notes, many Chinese critics of Western democracy "attribute [America's] most serious problems, such as poverty and crime, to its African American population," because they see Blacks as people of a "low quality, […] who have failed in the Darwinist struggle for survival" (p. 563). Western equal-rights initiatives are thus rejected by this group of Chinese people, who deem such initiatives as the hypocrisy of liberal elitists' "political correctness" that has now undermined the prosperity of advanced White civilization (Zhang, 2020), despite concrete evidence showing that it is structural racism that is a threat to the harmony of Euro-American societies (Illas, 2020). Against this backdrop, nationalists' appropriation of Euro-American right-wing populist rhetoric is increasingly observed in China's public debates, evidenced by the rise of Donald Trump fans in the Chinese-language social media sphere (Lin, 2021).

For many Chinese people who are critical of the CCP, racial equality is not widely accepted either. Specifically, albeit with its discriminatory essence, the CCP's racial policy involves establishing an "affirmative action empire," which seeks "to protect and preserve the frontier minorities from Han domination" (Leibold, 2010, p. 543). This multi-culturalist model does not cancel the fact that ethnic minorities' political and socio-economic statuses are systematically disadvantaged, and their freedoms of religion and speech are heavily restricted (Luqiu & Yang, 2020). However, the implementation of this model in visible areas, such as access to higher education, provides the Han majority with a perception of favoritism for ethnic minorities (Luqiu & Yang, 2020). As such, Chinese criticisms of Western progressive equal-rights initiatives do not always target liberal leftists in the original context but also serve as a vehicle for political commentating in China's domestic politics (Peng, Cummings, & Li, 2020). This pattern of political commentating enables a group of Chinese dissidents to appropriate Euro-American societies as an analogy

to put forward their subtextual critique of the administration's racial policy, which is perceived to have hampered the Han majority's "legitimate" social domination (Pfafman et al., 2015). In this sense, it emerges as "a way of critiquing the government without personal consequences" within an authoritarian regime, "where resistance to the government is highly restricted" (Pfafman et al., 2015, p. 551).

Amid China becoming a global economic powerhouse, an increased presence of the Black community is observed in the country, especially in metropolitan cities such as Guangzhou, due to its close trade relations with African nations (Mathews, Lin, & Yang, 2017; Yang, 2012). The increased visibility of Blackness in Chinese society is paired with social-mediated misinformation, which stereotypically associates Blacks as carriers of "horrific" viruses, such as HIV/AIDS and, more recently, COVID-19 in the wake of the ongoing pandemic (Liu et al., 2021). Contextualizing against the historical configuration of racial discourses, a social milieu for anti-Black sentiments to propagate is constituted in the Chinese-language social media sphere (Liu & Deng, 2020). This offers the epistemological foundation for the present research, which aims to explore how such racial politics specifically plays out in China's basketball fandom, where the representation of Blackness is prominent.

Research Methods

In this article, we conducted empirical research using the Chinese-language platform Hupu as the data repository to explore the intersection of sports fandom and racial politics in the Chinese context. Hupu is the most-used social media platform for organizing sports fandom on the Chinese-language Internet (Sohu, 2020). Launched in 2004, Hupu has an established reputation among Chinese NBA spectators. Recent statistics show that Hupu has approximately 55 million active users, who generate 700,000 posts daily (Zhou, Mou, Su, & Wu, 2020). The sports fandom platform is mainly populated by male spectators aged between 20 and 29, with most of them residing in urban areas in eastern and south-eastern provinces (Sohu, 2020). In this way, Hupu users' postings offer a glimpse of the views shared by young, male middle-classes, who evidently play a pivotal role in China's socio-political processes.

Our data collection focused on Hupu users' postings concerning the elite NBA athlete Lebron James's involvement in the BLM movement. Being widely acknowledged as one of the best professional basketballers, James is extremely popular with Chinese NBA spectators (Zhou et al., 2017). The African-American athlete happens to be a vocal equal-rights activist, who has a record of supporting the BLM initiative (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). His high-profile engagement with the movement places him in the spotlight, offering his Chinese fans opportunities to access racial politics through sports consumption. Using Hupu's search engine, we searched keywords "James" (詹姆斯) and "BLM" (Black Lives Matter/BLM/黑人的命也是命/黑命贵) and located the six most-discussed news stories concerning both James and BLM protests published in 2020.[2] We retrieved all postings from the threads beneath the stories, which resulted in a total of 1,481 posts being collected. Details of the data source are summarized in Table 1.

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[2] The search was undertaken in February 2021, which returned over 100 results. Only news stories that attracted over 100 posts were selected.

Table 1. Sampled News Stories.

Headline	Date	Views	Posts
James Mourns the Black Being Shot Dead in Street: We Cannot Even Jog Outside (Hupu, 2020a)	May 6, 2020	182,226	224
James Participates in the "More Than a Vote" Initiative, Which Protects African Americans' Voting Rights (Hupu, 2020b)	June 11, 2020	54,982	190
James Retweets Photos of the Blacks Being Persecuted 100 Years Ago: You Do Not Understand the Pain Unless You Understand the History (Hupu, 2020c)	June 16, 2020	167,182	453
James: We Have to Play until the Referee Blows Their Whistle. What We Do Is Not Just for Black People (Hupu, 2020d)	July 31, 2020	228,980	148
A Large Crowd of BLM Protesters Stop an NBA Media Bus to Seek Athletes' Support [James] (Hupu, 2020e)	September 13, 2020	145,003	203
James: Members of the Black Community Often Talk a Lot but Do Little (Hupu, 2020f)	December 11, 2020	86,893	263
Total	N/A	865,226	1,481

Hupu users' postings were first analyzed by using CA. CA is a typical quantitative research method, which provides an "objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (Berelson, 1952, p. 263). In this research, CA was used to determine the sentiments of Hupu users' postings. Specifically, the sampled posts were coded by two research assistants, who were provided with sufficient research training before performing the tasks. One of them coded all 1,481 posts, while the other coded 10% of the total (150 posts) for the inter-coder reliability tests. The testing results showed that the inter-coder reliability (Scott's Pi) was .85 for the first variable, .78 for the second, .86 for the third, and .93 for the last, which were considered satisfactory in CA research traditions. On the CA results, we implemented CDA, seeking qualitative interpretations of the textual data by focusing on the logic of power exercise behind discursive practices (Wodak, 2015). At this analytical stage, we followed Majid KhosraviNik and Nadia Sarkhoh's (2017) prescription, adopting Wodak's discourse-historical account of CDA to scrutinize how "referential (naming) strategies, predicational (description) strategies, and argumentation strategies" (p. 3,619) were evoked in Hupu users' postings. These discursive strategies were analyzed in relation to the socio-political engineering of Chinese racial discourses to uncover the reflection of racism in Hupu users' textual production.

CA Coding and Measurement

The CA coding scheme consisted of the following variables: the sentiments toward (1) Lebron James, (2) the BLM movement, and (3) Blacks, as well as (4) the mentioning of racial classification in Hupu users' postings. A total of 399 (26.9%) posts were determined to be supportive of James, while 110 (7.4%) posts were coded as negative about him, with an additional 972 (65.6%) falling into the neutral or non-applicable category. The second variable was coded against the criterion of what sentiment toward the BLM movement was revealed in a post. Results showed that 102 (6.9%) posts were positive about BLM protests, while 373 (25.2%) posts appeared to be against the movement. The number of posts in the neutral or non-applicable category was 1,006 (67.9%). The third variable was coded according to the attitudes toward Blacks as a racial group revealed in a post. In general, 71 (4.8%) posts were considered positive about Blacks, and 213 posts (14.4%) leaned toward negative about this racial group. A total of 1,197 (80.8%) posts were coded as neither positive nor negative on this front. We further coded a post based on its mentioning of racial classification. A total of 363 (24.5%) posts mentioned words or phrases relating to the concept of race, and the remaining 1,118 (75.5%) were in the non-mention category.

Results

According to the coding results, volumes of the sampled posts did not show clear sentiments toward James, the BLM movement, or Blacks, and the mentioning of racial classification was only detected in one-fourth of the sampled posts. Yet, this by no means suggested that racially biased discourses were not popular in Hupu users' postings. Instead, this phenomenon was a result of the sampled posts being often brief and not of an argumentative style, meaning that values and preferences embedded in these posts could sometimes be ambiguous. It is important to note that a general tendency toward supporting James and disapproving of the BLM movement and Blacks was manifested within the posts that did show values and preference.

A series of chi-square tests was performed to examine the relationships between Hupu users' sentiments toward James and their attitudes toward the BLM movement, Blacks, and the mentioning of racial classification. The results of the chi-square tests included both the statistical significance level (p-value) and a measure of effect size (Cramer's V). While we set the significance level at alpha .05, we interpreted the effect size by using Jacob Cohen's (1977) system and set the cutting points of .1, .3, and .5 for weak, medium, and strong associations, respectively.

As shown in Table 2, 15.5% of the posts supportive of James also demonstrated positive sentiments toward the BLM movement. In comparison, only .9% of the posts hostile toward James showed positive sentiments toward BLM protests. The p-value of .000 revealed that the above results were statistically significant, meaning that there was an association between sentiments toward James and attitudes toward the BLM movement revealed in the posts. The Cramer's V-value of .274 indicated that such an association was between weak and medium.

Table 2. Comparisons of Attitudes Toward the BLM Movement, Blacks, and
Mentioning of Racial Classification by Sentiments Toward Lebron James.

Sentiments		James			Chi-square tests		
		Positive (N=399)	Negative (N=110)	N/A (N=972)	*df*	*p*	*V*
BLM	Positive	15.5%	0.9%	4.0%	4	.000	.274
	Negative	31.3%	42.7%	20.7%			
	N/A	53.1%	56.4%	75.3%			
Blacks	Positive	3.8%	0.0%	5.8%	4	.001	.080
	Negative	9.8%	14.5%	16.3%			
	N/A	86.5%	85.5%	78.0%			
Racial classification	Yes	22.3%	21.8%	25.7%	2	.352	.039
	No	77.7%	78.2%	74.3%			

We also tested the relationships between sentiments toward James and being positive about Black people but found no statistically significant results, as the *V* was below .1, though the *p*-values were small at .001. No relationship between being positive about James and the mentioning of racial classification was found either, as the *p*-value was very large at .352.

The results revealed that the idolization of James modestly encouraged Hupu users to sympathize with the BLM movement. Yet, being a fan of James did not change the possibility of one being hostile toward Blacks or evoking the notion of racial classification in their postings. This pointed toward the similar rhetoric appropriated by different camps of Hupu users, regardless of their fan identities, in their postings.

CDA Analytical Discussion

In light of the CA results, we focused on the textual production of the sampled posts in the CDA process. The analysis discovered both political and apolitical incentives in Hupu users' postings, which revealed how racial discourses functioned in the sports fandom.

Supporting James but Insulting Blacks

From a CDA perspective, communication can first be scrutinized at a micro, textual level (Wodak, 2015). In the dataset, Hupu users' postings were prompted by news stories concerning the elite NBA player, James, constituting the micro context in which their lexical choices were made in a specific situation. The meaning-making of posts could not be unpacked without an acknowledgement of the micro context in which they were generated.

Time Magazine headline—"Athlete of the Year: Lebron James" (Gregory, 2020)
Hupu headline—"James: Members of the Black Community Often Talk a Lot But do Little"
(Hupu, 2020e)

In the present case, the posts were retrieved from the threads beneath translated news stories on Hupu. Taking the sixth news story as an example, it was a profile feature of James originally published in *Time* Magazine (Gregory, 2020). The original profile feature, which was over 3,000 English words in length, was summarized within 900 Chinese characters. In the present instance, the process of translation clearly involved agenda-setting, in the sense that aspects of the original article were deemed more relevant than others. In particular, a specific quote, "members of the Black community often talk a lot but do little," from James, instead of the original *Time* headline, was used as the title of the translated article (Hupu, 2020e). Being taken out of context, the quote conveyed ambiguous textual meanings, which could possibly be interpreted as either approval of the BLM movement or disapproval of Blacks as a racial group. Such an ambiguous type of title was consistently used throughout the six collected pieces. It turned a post in the threads simply affirmative or disapproving of James's quote into an ambiguous statement, which declared no obvious political standpoint but support for the elite athlete. This kind of posting underlined an apolitical camp of Hupu users' BLM engagement, which was limited within the sports world.

Certainly, there were posts critical of James ($N = 111$). Yet, considering the popularity James enjoyed in China's basketball fandom (Zhou et al., 2017), it was not surprising to see volumes of commentaries of the apolitical kind, which merely contained positive notes on his personal qualities. These two posts reading "To be honest, James is admirable for being able to see this" (User 3, as cited in Hupu, 2020a, n.p.) and "More than an athlete!" (User 68, as cited in Hupu, 2020c, n.p.) were exemplary on this front.

Hupu users' apolitical valorization of James came against the backdrop of the basketball player himself being "emblematic of the modern athlete-activist" (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017, p. 425), who stood out in terms of political engagement compared with previous-generation NBA superstars. Yet, despite James's long-standing, active participation in the BLM movement, support for such an equal-rights initiative seemed to be scarce on Hupu. Rather, volumes of posts criticizing Blacks ($N = 213$) or the BLM movement ($N = 373$) were found on Hupu, showcasing that the positive sentiments toward James did not translate into Chinese basketball fans' affirmation of equal-rights movements in general. Rather, a wide range of racialization exercises surfaced, as these Hupu users voiced their disapproval of Blacks and their equal-rights political ambition.

Hupu users supportive of James often attempted to distinguish between James and ordinary Blacks. In such instances, Hupu users' postings showed similarities with that of their Western counterparts, which painted sport as "a space of meritocracy, where athletes who rise to stardom are thought to do so based solely on their talent and dedication" (Dickerson, 2016, p. 306). Yet, some of these Hupu users' postings, such as the one reading "James' IQ is so high that he does not look like a Black guy" (User 85, as cited in Hupu, 2020e, n.p.), stood out because of their reference to racial classification.

As shown in the extract above, describing James as a person with a "high IQ score," User 85 (as cited in Hupu, 2020e, n.p.) drew a line between the elite athlete and the averages of the racial group to which he belongs. The textual production involved a predicational strategy, which implicitly perpetuated racial stereotypes of the biologically determined kind. Within a discourse-historical account of CDA, predicational strategy refers to a specific linguistic practice, which qualifies "social actors, objects, phenomena, and events" (KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh, 2017, p. 3,623) to define their meanings in the

communicative process. In this instance, the predication specifically referenced the concept of IQ, qualifying James as a member of a subtype, rather than a subgroup, of Blacks, whose level of intelligence was much superior to the average. Such a positive note on the Black athlete paradoxically marginalized any positive impression of Blacks as a racial group. Revisiting the threads, one could find no clue that encouraged such an intelligence assessment. Yet, the gist of the post was clearly not at odds with the historically configured biological determinism of race in Chinese society.

As previously mentioned, the current racial discourses in China have inherited aspects of pseudo-scientific anthropological knowledge developed in the 19th century, which categorized human beings into five races following a hierarchical order (Yoshihiro, 2003). In the hierarchy, while Chinese people are placed in the same position as Caucasians, Blacks are confined to the bottom, being portrayed as an embodiment of "feeblemindedness" and "stupidity" subordinate to all other racial types (Cheng, 2011). Today, the hierarchical racial classification manifests new viability, because mainstream Chinese narratives, despite their nationalist roots and Sino-Western competitive frame, portray the modernization of China as a project emulating Euro-American White civilization (Johnson, 2007). Amid the political rhetoric of the Sino-African alliance being marginalized, the "feebleminded" stereotype of Blacks has once again prevailed in public debates (Liu et al., 2021; Pfafman et al., 2015), paving the way for more racist postings to emerge on Hupu.

Generating Playful Yet Racist Commentaries

On Hupu, a distinctive feature of many posts racializing Blacks was the sense of playfulness being highlighted in the textual production, speaking of the recreational purpose of social media users' fandom participation.

Figure 1. The image post by User 119 (as cited in Hupu, 2020e, n.p).

As can be seen in the example above, the post, taking the form of a meme, was generated by User 119 (as cited in Hupu, 2020e, n.p.). in the threads beneath a news story titled "*Crowds of BLM Protesters Stopped an NBA Media Van and Cried for Athletes' Support.*" Memes are a form of digital artifacts, which are created through a combination of texts and visual aids, using "parodies, remixes, [and/or] mashups" (Fang, 2020, p. 39) to communicate meanings in a playful way. The meme posted by User 119 was comprised of two parts. Visually, it included an image of a gang of dark-skinned ethnic minorities escaping from a grocery store that they seemed to have just robbed. Textually, the image was captioned "a Black brother died trajectorially, and a gang of poor Blacks showed their sad faces after looted a shop." While the visual content specifically highlighted gangsters, who happened to be ethnically Black, smiling at the crime scene, it was captioned that they were showing "sad faces." The juxtaposition of highly contrasted messages created a sense of irony and sarcasm. The post per se contained no literal insult, but a mocking undertone surfaced from the juxtaposition, pointing toward a subtextual reference to the chaos created by a smaller group of lawbreakers in the midst of BLM protests. Devising irony and sarcasm as the veneer, the posting distanced User 119 from an excessive, overt insult to Blacks and turned itself into a funny, creative artifact, which could easily be copied and circulated in the digital space. However, such a veneer did not conceal the deeply biased essence of the Hupu user's racial view.

Memes were not the most-posted form of texts on Hupu but were the type often well received by their audiences. The playfulness underlying the production of these memes was representative of how some Hupu users articulated their aversion to the BLM movement within a sports fandom, where entertainment, rather than political engagement, was its default function. Such posting exercises were in line with the recreational tradition of meme production long established on the Chinese-language Internet (Fang, 2020), which shed light on the convergence between politics and apolitical incentives behind social media users' political engagement (Bi, 2022).

Disapproving of the Liberal Left in Western Democratic Politics

With the political axis in mind, we further scrutinized differing argumentation strategies evoked in Hupu users' textual postings, focusing on how their socio-political views were expressed through racial discourses. In general, Hupu users' political engagement could point toward either an international or a domestic trajectory. In terms of the international trajectory, racializing Blacks often constituted these Hupu users' criticisms of liberal leftists in Euro-American democracies. For instance, these two posts read "He would have to retire if he were White […]. You can always count on Lebron" (User 205, as cited in Hupu, 2020e, n.p.) and "The result would be a disaster if the words came from a White player. Only James could [say such things]. [He is] so great!" (User 126, as cited in Hupu, 2020e, n.p.). In these posts, a similar predicational strategy was used in both posts, marking a positive note on James paradoxically based on the potential controversy of his commentary. Specifically, both posts predicated that James's reputation would be tarnished if he were ethnically Caucasian. The posts were generated in the threads of a news story that specifically quoted James's words, "members of the Black community often talk a lot but do little" (Hupu, 2020e, n.p.). As previously mentioned, the quote was often interpreted as James' criticism of his fellow African Americans on Hupu. The predication was accomplished by pointing out both the rightfulness of James's commentary and the negative personal consequence it might cause to him. In this way, the predication was put forward based on a prerequisite: namely, criticizing Blacks was only allowed when the critics happened to be from within the community as well. Considering the register of the postings, which entailed apparent references to American politics, one could argue that these Hupu users were exploiting the opportunity to reject the notion of "political correctness," which was associated with liberal-leaning, progressive politics in the Western context. To this end, the extract reading "The Blacks have a much higher crime rate, and this is why everyone is afraid of them […]. Do not pretend to be a holy mother here" (User 36, as cited in Hupu, 2020d, n.p.) offered an ideal example. The post described people supportive of Blacks as the "holy mother" but in a rather negative tone, made these Hupu users' rejection of progressive political agendas and their blindness to the systematic racism in Western societies explicit.

As Chenchen Zhang (2020) notes, "holy mother" is a stigmatized term, which is used by Chinese social media users to label both liberal-leaning Western politicians and anyone who sympathizes with their politics as "sanctimonious" (p. 110). In this sense, the posts explicitly evoking the term, alongside those that showed similar values, expressed a Chinese worldview, which was dismissive of the achievements of progressive equal-rights politics gradually established in post-war Euro-American democratic traditions.

Running parallel to the recent rise of right-wing populism in major Western democracies, growing hostility toward progressive politics has been observed in China. This is most tellingly evidenced by a large

segment of the Chinese population resonating with Trump-style rhetoric when they engage with high-profile international political affairs, such as the U.S. general election and the European refugee crisis (Zhang, 2020). Within the Chinese appropriation of this rhetoric, the so-called Western "liberal elites" are targeted, and their political ambitions, such as the pursuits of pro-immigration and racial justice, are condemned as threatening Western civilization (Lin, 2021). Shockingly, such rhetoric is accepted across the Chinese political spectrum, which forms a general consensus shared by both the pro-CCP masses and relatively well-informed liberal intellectuals (Zhang, 2020). The cross-partisan anti-Western, liberal-left sentiments are unique to Chinese society, representing a nexus for different political factions to reach an agreement when debating foreign affairs.

Pushing for Nationalist Agendas in Both Domestic and International Contexts

In the Hupu community, political postings were largely informed by nationalist agendas. Such nationalist political commentaries were expressed through two prisms, concerning either interracial frictions within Chinese society or China's position on the world stage. In terms of the former orientation, international racial politics was viewed as an analogy to China's internal issues, which provided a site for subtextual critiques. Such critiques were evident in the extract reading "I admire Old J (老詹) and like watching the NBA, but this does not change the fact that I am annoyed by the Blacks living in China" (User 3, as cited in Hupu, 2020a, n.p.). In association with a positive note on the personal qualities of James, User 3's appropriation of the elite athlete's Chinese-language nickname was affirmative of their sports fan identity. Yet, the idolization of James was juxtaposed with a blatant insult to Blacks as an entire racial group. In particular, the insult was framed in a highly personal way. It not only reflected Chinese fans' separation between elite Black NBA athletes and their racial backgrounds but also pointed toward their biased assessment of interracial frictions between African immigrants and local communities in China. The post was upvoted over 1,000 times, revealing that such political commentary was very much well received by members of the Hupu community.

The domestic orientation of Hupu users' postings paved the way for racist commentaries targeting African immigrants to emerge on Hupu. This trajectory of commentating did not take place in isolation but was specific to the increased visibility of the Black community in Chinese society today: In China's current quest for superpower status, Africa is of economic significance, with many countries on the continent now becoming key partners in the Belt and Road global infrastructure development initiative (Ehizuelen & Abdi, 2018). In this process, China also emerges as a new destiny for African immigrants, who come from diverse backgrounds and are attracted to metropolitan cities, such as Guangzhou, to start a new life there (Yang, 2012). These African immigrants often operate small and medium-sized businesses, which are associated with "job opportunities mainly for the marginalized and disadvantaged groups […], such as migrant workers and individual petty entrepreneurs" (Lan, 2016, p. 313). Conditioned by the state government's silence on racism (Liu et al., 2021), interracial frictions are gradually intensified in Chinese society, and this has a significant impact on Chinese people's understanding of Blackness at both individual and epistemological levels (Lan, 2016). The intensity of the interracial frictions was most recently observed during the pandemic in a series of social-mediated misinformation campaigns, which portray African immigrants as super-spreaders of the COVID-19 virus (Liu et al., 2021). In our dataset, the repercussion of the misinformation campaigns was most tellingly revealed by these three posts, which read "What did the Blacks do this year?"

(User 10, in Hupu, 2020d, n.p.), "They do not follow Covid-19 contact-tracing rules" (User 23, in Hupu, 2020d, n.p.), and "Blacks tore a doctor's face apart in Guangzhou!" (User 161, in Hupu, 2020d, n.p.).

The above extracts further elucidated User 3's racist view by underscoring the interactive nature of social-mediated communication. The interactive commentating started with User 10 raising the question of why Blacks were criticized and User 23 answering by suggesting that many of them did not comply with COVID-19 restrictions that accelerated local outbreaks in China. The posting cycle went on as User 161 referenced an anecdote of Black people's "shocking, violent crimes" committed in Guangzhou, making their racial agendas in the domestic context apparent (User 161, as cited in Hupu, 2020d, n.p.). The postings *per se* were a result of specific pandemic misinformation, but their racialization of Blacks indeed fueled the ongoing rise of anti-Black sentiments in wider Chinese society (Liu et al., 2021). Such postings turned Hupu into a platform for propagating anti-African-immigrant politics, showcasing how social-mediated communication facilitated the amplification of racism by allowing anti-Black sentiments to prevail in the Chinese-language social media sphere.

Hupu users' anti-Black sentiments did not always orient toward interracial frictions within the border of their nation. Instead, subtextual commentaries on world politics outside of the racial context were also found, with many of them evidently utilizing the opportunity to advocate their visions of the international geopolitical order.

> User 97: To be honest, I really hope Old J becomes Mandela of America and turns the United States into South Africa. At the end of the day, I love Old J but not America. I just hope that Old J's personal dreams are fulfilled. (as cited in Hupu, 2020e, n.p.)

As shown in the above extract, User 97, who also identified as a fan of James, suggested that his hope was for the athlete to become "Nelson Mandela of the United States" (User 97, as cited in Hupu, 2020e, n.p.). At first glance, the post appeared to contain a positive note on Mandela, which associated the pioneer human-rights advocator with the elite athlete the user idolized. Yet, offering a hypothetical proposition, the Hupu user predicted that James's political activism could "turn the United States into South Africa." With the United States being the "beacon of democracy" and South Africa being merely a regional power in the Global South (Lin, 2021, p. 85), it became apparent that the seemingly positive note included an underlying negative undertone, which paradoxically dismissed Mandela's widely recognized political legacies. User 97's commentary alone appeared to be out of the blue. Yet, the posts reading "[I] hope this will aggravate social cleavages in America" (User 624, as cited in Hupu, 2020g, n.p.) and "Then a Chinese boss could buy all NBA teams and players" (User 151, as cited in Hupu, 2020g, n.p.), which were retrieved from the same thread, probably offered an intertextual explanation of the commentary.

Once again reflecting the interactive pattern of social-mediated communication, the posting circle started with User 624 describing the BLM movement as a source of chaos that would destroy the United States and was followed by User 151 explaining that this would offer Chinese businesses the opportunity to take over the entire NBA. The latter post was limited within the sports world. However, in association with the former's politics-oriented predication, the pair clearly endorsed a competing logic of international

geopolitics, which viewed the fall of the United States as a chance for China's rise. It showcased how racial discourses and nationalist politics became relevant in Hupu users' sports consumption.

As much of the literature reveals, there has been a consistent renaissance of nationalism in China, where the urgency to restore its Middle-Kingdom glories emerges as a general consensus shared by different political factions (Schneider, 2018; Wu, 2020). Such a nationalist ethos is constructed on the country's past anti-colonial struggles, manifesting itself as an attempt to challenge the current world geopolitical hierarchy, which is considered to have favored the U.S.-led coalition. Both exploiting and feeding into the CCP's propaganda campaigns, this nationalist ethos portrays the West as a homogenous anti-China unity, especially in the midst of the tensions between China and major Euro-American democracies escalating during the pandemic (de Kloet, Lin, & Chow, 2020). As such, Hupu users' dismissal of the social values of equal-rights agendas, as well as their opportunist views on Western liberal lefts' pursuits of such agendas, shed light on the dynamic, complex intersection of racism and nationalism established in a Chinese worldview. It is indicative of how racial discourses are appropriated to advocate nationalist politics in the Chinese context, where progressive values are strangely considered the very problem of Western-style democracy (Lin, 2021).

Conclusion

In this article, we have provided a critical analysis of how racism unfolds in China's sports fandom, using social media users' postings retrieved from the most popular Chinese-language digital sports fandom platform, Hupu, as a case study. The analysis reveals complex or even paradoxical interpretations of race shared by Chinese basketball fans. While being NBA spectators is always associated with idolizing elite Black athletes, such an idolization does not often translate into their sympathy and support for Black people in general. This phenomenon comes against the backdrop of the BLM movement sweeping across the globe in 2020, which is considered to have raised awareness of the urgency of anti-racist activism elsewhere in the world. It elucidates that sports consumption, which promotes the visual representation of racial diversity, has little influence on Chinese basketball fans' attitudes toward Blacks, considering the long-existing racist traditions embedded in both the country's indigenous culture and its current socio-political climate (Cheng, 2011; Lan, 2016; Pfafman et al., 2015). Considering the user demographics of Hupu, the research findings resonate with recent scholarship on Chinese digital cultures, showcasing how anti-Black discrimination is taken for granted by a large cohort of young Chinese people, who are typically men living in eastern and south-eastern cities and holding highly toxic values and worldviews (Fang & Repnikova, 2018; Zhang, 2020).

The design of the current research has limitations. Yet, while there might be a possibility of selectively presenting data to verify our preconceived views on the subject matter, the bias of the CDA results has been mitigated by the triangulation of the CA method. Due to the brevity of Hupu users' postings, most of the sampled posts offer limited opportunity for abstracting their embedded political stances. However, among those that do offer such an opportunity, the discourse-historical analysis indeed discovers the analogy of Western right-wing populist rhetoric in Chinese sports fans' postings and the indigenous socio-political logic of their discursive practice behind the scenes.

The present study identifies that the appropriation of racial discourses in China's sports fandom is functional. Specifically, Chinese sports fans' often-racist worldview determines that their postings are usually full of discriminatory rhetoric. Amid the rise of nationalism in wider Chinese society (Schneider, 2018), this discursive practice feeds into a Chinese narrative of international geopolitical order, constructing major Western democracies as an anti-China unity, which is currently being undermined by the progressive left-leaning liberal elitists (Lin, 2020; Zhang, 2020). In this way, the momentum of "undesirable" equal-rights movements in the eyes of Chinese sports fans has been discursively constructed as an opportunity, which can be exploited by their home national state to prosper. Such a strange belief is affirmative of previous research findings, which reveal the nationalist axis of China's sports fandom (Lee, 2009).

Beyond the context of sports fandom research, the research findings make contributions to the studies of Chinese digital cultures more broadly. Today, scholarship has noted many creative ways of political engagement developed by Chinese social media users, despite their freedoms of speech and information being strictly regulated by the world's most sophisticated censorship system (Luqiu & Yang, 2020). These creative ways of political engagement are often masked with seemingly apolitical veneers, which allow social media users to bypass censorship and surveillance, as well as avoid personal consequences (Peng, Zhang, Cummings, & Zhang, 2020; Pfafman et al., 2015). Yet, such cultural practices not only facilitate digital democratization but also lead to the emergence and spread of "more pluralistic and critical discourses" (Fang & Repnikova, 2018, p. 2,164) on the Chinese-language Internet. In this process, a wide range of toxic values has reached a wider audience as a result of the polarization of views in the digital public sphere. Together with a large body of literature in the field (Lin, 2021; Peng, 2022), the research findings shed new light on how chauvinism and racialized representations perpetuate in the Chinese-language social media sphere.

Furthermore, the present research also adds value to an emerging body of scholarship on the BLM movement by offering a fresh pair of East Asian eyes. With the BLM movement gaining unprecedented momentum in 2020, a series of thought-provoking studies has examined its impacts on the landscape of world racial politics (Mourao & Kilgo, 2021; Pampapura Madali, Alsaid, & Hawamdeh, 2022; Phelps & Hamilton, 2022). However, such studies tend to prioritize Euro-American experiences, offering an inadequate account of the cross-border influence of the BLM movement in East Asia, where anti-Black sentiments are unreflectively taken for granted. As such, despite the gloomy picture being sketched out, our research findings encourage future studies to examine the transnational impacts of global equal-rights movements in the East Asian region for the sake of prescribing a futuristic, culture-sensitive approach that catalyzes progressive politics beyond a Eurocentric paradigm.

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