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From the dragon's perspective: an initial report on China's response to the unfolding Ebola epidemic

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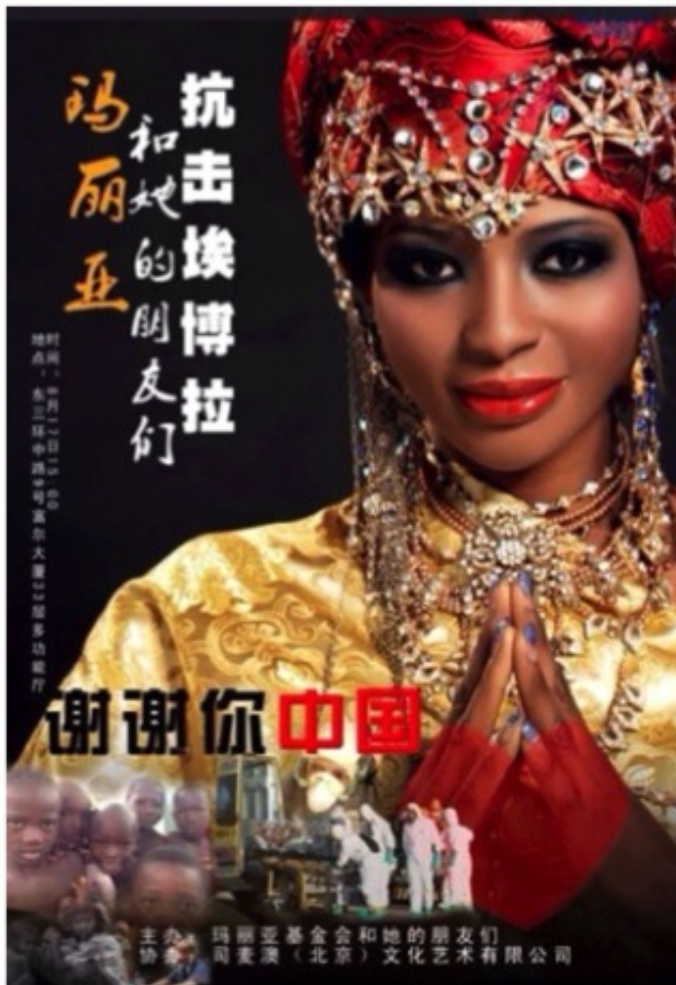


Figure 1: Poster of "Thank you, China. Combatting Ebola: Mariatu and her Chinese friends" event.

Source: http://news.xinhuanet.com/ent/2014-08/24/c_126909513.htm

On a steamy mid-August afternoon, Mariatu Kargbo, a Sierra Leonian expat residing in Beijing, stood at the front of a packed hotel ballroom. As reported by [Xinhua News](#) (???), Kargbo addressed the crowd, saying:

I know everyone has come because they would like to support us, but I really didn't know that today so many people would come, thank you everyone! What we've done today is to say to Ebola

‘You cannot go forward, you need to stop’!

Kargbo had organized the event as a fundraiser to support ongoing efforts to stop the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone. To this end, a variety of donated items were auctioned off, including art pieces from Chinese artists and several embassies of African countries, flights departing from Shanghai to Africa, pottery and ceramics, and a set of gloves donated by Chinese short-track speed skater [Yang Zhou](#). Kargbo was no stranger to fundraising: as Miss Sierra Leone 2009, she set up a [foundation](#) to donate school supplies and other things to those in need. Nor was she a stranger in China: she has appeared on Chinese variety shows, fielding questions about Africa and singing her song in Mandarin Chinese, “[Marry a Chinese](#)” (?????).^[1]

In this initial report, we provide insight into China’s response to Ebola as the epidemic unfolds. We focus on three key areas: 1) print media coverage, 2) social media commentary, and 3) brief stories of Africans living in Guangzhou. We finish with a discussion on the role of anthropology in engaging the ongoing epidemic, following [Sharon Abramowitz](#)’s recent post on Somatosphere.

Why raise the issue of China, a country that, to date, has not had any cases of Ebola?

The answer to this question is brought into view by Kargbo’s event, “Combatting Ebola: Mariatu and her Chinese friends,” exposing two overlapping trajectories that have emerged in recent years. First, the Chinese state sees itself as a global power, and as such, it should play a key role in global affairs. As China “goes global” (Shambaugh 2013), it adds a “distinctive” approach to global health (Han et al. 2008, Florini et al. 2012, Liu et al. 2014). Across the African continent, Chinese medical aid has come in the form of bilateral collaborations, financial and technical aid, and infrastructure projects. For example, the [Sierra Leone-China Friendship Hospital](#) was inaugurated by President Ernest Bai Koroma on November 13, 2012, after three years of construction, and is now being used to [treat Ebola patients \(photos here\)](#).

Second, Sino-African political and economic relations are substantial. In 2012, the total volume of trade between China and Africa reached *US\$198.4 billion*, with a year-on-year growth of 19.3% (Xinhua News 2013). Over more than a decade, the direct exports from Guangzhou to African countries (mainly manufactured products) have increased more than ten times, from around US\$165 million in 1996 to US\$2.1 billion in 2010 (Lyons, Brown, and Li 2012). As a result, there has been a substantial increase in migration between the regions (Mathews 2011,

Lyons, Brown, and Li 2012).

The Ebola outbreak adds another layer to the Sino-African relationship, whereby China is beginning to [take a more active role](#) in foreign aid to African countries and respond to emergency situations there. Therefore, China's role in the control of the Ebola epidemic, which is reported by Chinese media outlets, will influence future relationships with African countries.' Further, we posit social media commentary is a reflection of local anxieties about the outbreak, which largely work themselves out by framing "Africa" and "Africans," especially in China, as a threat.

"China is ready to join the international society to continuously work hard towards an effective prevention of this Ebola outbreak"
(???????????, ?????????????????????): Chinese print media coverage of Ebola

On October 15, 2014 we conducted an electronic search for Chinese language articles that mentioned Ebola using the electronic search tools available for two of China's top news outlets: [China Daily](#) (?????) and [People's Daily](#) (?????).^[2]^[3] Media coverage of Ebola is not new: since 2001, a total of 667 and 219 articles were returned for the *China Daily* and *People's Daily*, respectively (Figure 1). In 2014, both outlets had low coverage until July. The number of articles peaked in August, with most being published in the middle of the month when President Xi Jinping publically committed to aiding the international control effort in a meeting held in Nanjing with UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Curiously, as the number of cases increased and cases have emerged in Europe and North America, the monthly total of media reports for both newspapers decreased (Figure 2).

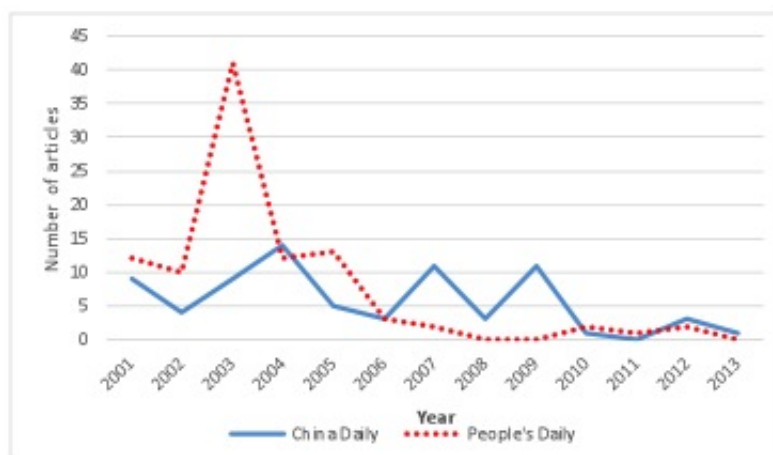


Figure 2: Number of articles that mention Ebola (埃博拉), 2001- 2013.

ideas and biases. To be clear, the quotes above have not been gathered systemically, but rather, have been selected for their discussions on the epidemic and Africans more generally. For Ebola, social media users ascribe risk onto an understanding of “African-ness,” whether it is located on the continent of Africa, or within African bodies when they come to reside in China, echoing previous racialized responses to HIV/AIDS (Hood 2011).

En brief: stories from African migrants

At the end of September 2014, Qiuyu Jiang returned to Canada from her fieldwork, which focuses on African migrants in Guangzhou. Below, she presents three short clips of how Ebola has already begun to affect this community. All names are pseudonyms.

Business as usual: the Nigerian merchant

Since 1957, Guangzhou has played host to the Canton Fair, a biannual business convention that attracts traders from around the world. The [Fall Canton Fair](#) is currently underway, attracting over 188,119 foreign visitors and generating US\$31 billion in business turnover in its 115th session held in Spring 2014. Amongst the crowds, African traders, many of whom have traveled from Nigeria, Mali, Senegal, and other countries to attend, are easily identifiable.

Business is booming as usual, unimpeded by global media-grabbing events, such as the student protests in Hong Kong, on-going airstrikes against ISIS, or even the Ebola epidemic. That is, except for those that cannot attend due to travel restrictions. For these who can make it, there is perhaps less competition. “Oh, (Ebola to me has) no influence at all,” one Nigerian trader commented. “I just picked up my countrymen from the airport and put them in the hotels. They came without a problem. There are some screening procedures at the airport but not much warning.”

Closed borders: the Guinean trader

In Guinea, Mohamed, an African trader, has been waiting anxiously for his Chinese visa. He had returned to his hometown in May 2014 for his son’s birthday, and a much-needed vacation from his busy trading life in Guangzhou. He described his situation as follows:

Truly, I want to come back. Many of my Chinese friends and businessmen colleagues are calling me day and night, asking when I can be back. I have an apartment in Guangzhou; I am still paying rent but I cannot be

back. You know how easy it used to be for me to get a visa...But now because of the disease, people are afraid. I pray to God every day to take away Ebola and let me back to do business again.

Since many neighbouring African countries began shutting down the border with Guinea due to the Ebola epidemic, he has largely lost hope. In his absence, Mohamed has asked his sister, who remains in Guangzhou as a student, to temporarily represent him in his business affairs. "Business is a secret; I cannot let other strangers into this." Under Chinese immigrant law, however, student visas do not allow for employment, and thus, his sister runs the risk of being deported if she were to be found out by the authorities.

Not taking any chances: the Guinean student

Sitting outside of a local university's enrolment services office in Guangzhou, Mamadou, an international student from Guinea, was disheartened to find out his transfer request had been denied. He had already been in the city for two years, residing there on a student visa. He had many reasons for wanting to transfer universities. Mamadou was excited to attend better language courses, and also be more integrated into the African community, who were enrolled at the university in larger numbers. Finally, like many other foreign students in China, he worked secretly in his spare time in order to cover his daily expenses; the university he was looking to transfer to offered a more convenient course schedule for his needs. He explained:

I want to change my school...but they say (that) because I am from Guinea, they are afraid that I will bring Ebola to them. But for almost two years, I have not been back to my hometown. I am in China! Where can I get this disease? Now I have to go back to the school I don't like.

Discussion: Towards an anthropology of unfolding engagement

Ebola has not followed the trajectory that was predicted at the outset of the epidemic, and the response from anthropologists has similarly been unexpected. Normally critiqued for being slow and responsive, in this instance, anthropologists have been visibly involved in public health debates as well as ongoing reflection on the (potential) implications of the epidemic to the discipline. For example, on October 2 the American Anthropological Association (AAA) hosted a ["webinar"](#) on Ebola; *Cultural Anthropology* published a [special series](#) on October 7th; and since August,

a number of essays have appeared here on *Somatosphere* in the series "[Ebola Fieldnotes](#)." Anthropologists have also used less discipline-specific platforms, such as [radio](#) (2), [print media](#), and [YouTube](#) to advocate for an improved response. In this report, we join the anthropological engagement as the Ebola epidemic unfolds, while adding an important geographic dimension that has been largely overlooked.

We position this initial report to capture some emergent trends in China surrounding the Ebola epidemic. As seen, while Chinese print media might have peaked in August, popular social media platforms, such as WeChat and Weibo, demonstrate a lively on-going discussion in China about Ebola. In spite of official warnings of the dangers of spreading rumors online, social media users are sharing a variety of kinds of information about the risks, modes of transmissions, and methods to manage Ebola. In Chinese, the disease is distinctly foreign due to its transliteration, and such rumors reflect the anxiety of importing a disease from the outside. Africans, as visible minorities, shoulder the burden of perceived risk, both abroad and within China. Conversations with African informants reveals that while some migrants continue to go about their business unaffected, the threat of Ebola has impacted the everyday choices of others. Coupled with online commentary, the perceived threat of Ebola may amplify existing racial schisms, which have escalated to [violent incidents](#) in recent years.

We are guided by previous social science work on recent epidemics in China, including SARS (Dirlikov 2005, Zhang 2006, Duan 2007), HIV/AIDS (Hood 2011, Hyde 2007), and avian influenza (Heffernan, Misturelli, and Thomson 2011, Dirlikov 2008), as well as historical examinations of disease (Heinrich 2008, Landsberger 2010, Hinrichs and Barnes 2013, Rogaski 2004). We further position this initial report as part of a growing body of social science research that examines Chinese in Africa (Yan and Sautman 2013, Mohan and Tan-Mullins 2009), as well as Africans in China (Ma and Bodomo 2012, Bodomo 2012, Bodomo 2010, Mathews 2011, Mathews, Lin, and Yang 2014, Han 2013, Haugen 2012, Lyons, Brown, and Li 2012).

Finally, we would like to offer an example in which anthropologists make contributions that at once are unique to anthropology and informative to public health experts, policy makers, and the public at large. Here, we follow [Sharon Abramowitz](#), who argues that anthropologists can "systematically observe, report on, interpret, and explain local perspectives on the Ebola epidemic response." This requires a different type of anthropological engagement that is timely, proactive, and useful beyond the confines of the discipline. Yet, the cornerstones of anthropological research remain central. Indeed, in preparing this report over the course of one week, we have both reached out to contacts in

China, and have drawn on background information derived from long-term fieldwork and personal experience in China.

As China is a major player in Africa and global (health) affairs more generally, we argue for a fuller analysis of the consequences Ebola has had and will continue to have in China, as well as on the citizens of China and of African countries who live there.

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Notes

[1] In this report, we follow the Chinese discourse on Africa, which generally homogenizes the entire continent into one as 黑人. Further, we translate 黑人 (lit. "black person") as "African."

[2] All media in China falls under state control, with the *People's Daily* serving as the government's official news outlet, and the *China Daily* serving as a more outward looking news source that is also published in English and French.

[3] There are two terms for "Ebola" in Chinese: 伊波拉 (yībōlā) and 埃博拉 (āibōlā). Both terms are transliterations of the English pronunciation, and it appears that the former is used more frequently in mainland China, while the latter is used more extensively in Hong Kong and Taiwan.

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