

The Digital Gaze: Chinese Social Media Representations of Africa and Implications for Sino-Zimbabwean Intercultural Perception

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ABSTRACT: This study examines how Africa and Africans are represented in Chinese-language user-generated content on Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat, and explores the implications of these representations for Sino-Zimbabwean intercultural relations. As government-to-government ties deepen through Zimbabwe's "Look East" policy, everyday encounters between Chinese nationals and Zimbabweans in tourism, business, and industry are increasingly shaped by digital impressions formed before physical contact. Drawing on the concept of the *_digital gaze_*, the study employed a two-phase qualitative design: Phase 1 involved thematic analysis of 900 user comments from six high-engagement posts collected between June and August 2026; Phase 2 involved 15 semi-structured interviews with Zimbabwean hosts in Harare, Bulawayo, and Victoria Falls conducted between July and September 2026. Findings identify seven interconnected frames in the social media discourse: biological essentialism and embodied difference, pseudoscience and evolutionary hierarchization, moral deficit and relational distrust, racialized competence and leadership exclusion, othering and social distance, denial through the language of truth, and counter-discourse. The analysis shows that these frames present Africa as a homogeneous category and legitimize inequality through scientific language, paternalistic assumptions, and appeals to common sense. The study argues that such digital representations may function as interpretive schemas that shape expectations about safety, competence, and trust, with potential consequences for recruitment, delegation, and workplace inclusion in Zimbabwe. Theoretically, the paper extends Framing Theory, Cultivation Theory, and Social Identity Theory by integrating *ubuntu* — "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" as an African ethical lens to assess dignity and reciprocity in intercultural encounters. Empirically, it is among the first to trace the pathway from Chinese social media discourse to host interpretation in Southern Africa. The study recommends a three-part intervention: Deconstruct racialized narratives, Replace stereotypes with complex and humanizing representations, and Practise equitable intercultural relations grounded in *_ubuntu_*. It concludes that sustaining Sino-Zimbabwean relations requires attention not only to trade and infrastructure, but to the everyday meanings through which people understand one another online and offline.

KEYWORDS: Digital gaze, Sino-Zimbabwean relations, Chinese social media, *ubuntu*, intercultural communication, Africa representation, racialization

I. INTRODUCTION

➤ **Background and Problem Statement :** In the 21st century, Sino-Zimbabwean relations are no longer confined to state visits, trade agreements, or infrastructure deals. They are lived daily in markets, factories, hotels, and tourist sites. In Zimbabwe this proximity is immediate: a Chinese tourist at Victoria Falls, a factory manager in Bulawayo, a shop owner in Harare, and Zimbabwean employees navigating new workplace expectations. This people-to-people contact deepened after Zimbabwe's "Look East" policy in the early 2000s. China is now Zimbabwe's largest trading partner and a leading source of investment in energy, transport, mining, and agriculture ¹(ZIMSTAT, 2025). Official discourse describes an "all-weather friendship" based on mutual respect and shared development.

Yet before any handshake, safari, or work shift, the first encounter often happens online. In China, platforms such as Douyin, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu are where millions form images of the outside world. In Zimbabwe, TikTok and Facebook shape views of China. These platforms function as what Urry (2002)² called the "tourist gaze" — but accelerated, democratized, and algorithmically curated. We call this the *_digital gaze_*. Emerging evidence suggests this digital gaze is powerful but partial. On Chinese social media, Africa is frequently framed as a single, undifferentiated space defined by material lack: poverty, hunger, disease, infrastructure deficits, and concerns about safety and work ethic. These are not abstract narratives. As one Victoria Falls tourism operator stated in August 2025:

¹ Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency. (2025). Quarterly trade statistics bulletin: Q4 2024. ZIMSTAT.

² Urry, J. (2002). *The tourist gaze* (2nd ed.). Sage.

“They bring their own food, like noodles, because they think there is hunger here. They bring bags of pills because they think there are diseases. They inspect their bags because they think there are thieves... They end up not treating Zimbabweans as people based on what they saw online.”

Such perceptions travel. They arrive with tourists who expect scarcity and risk. They arrive with managers who expect low productivity. And they collide with Zimbabwean values, particularly ubuntu “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu”: a person is a person through other people. Where ubuntu measures wealth in relationships and dignity, the digital gaze often measures it only in roads and buildings. Despite this, academic work has lagged. The literature on Sino-African relations is rich on political economy, trade, and debt (Brautigam, 2009³; Taylor, 2011⁴), but thin on how bottom-up social media discourse shapes everyday behavior. Few studies focus on Southern Africa, and none have traced the link: Chinese social media representation → behavior in Zimbabwe → host interpretation through ubuntu. This gap matters because the quality of Sino-Zimbabwean relations will increasingly be determined not in boardrooms, but in the first 24 hours of contact: at an airport, hotel reception, shop floor, or worksite. When digital misperceptions shape first impressions, they create friction that undermines tourism, business collaboration, and the “people-to-people” goals of FOCAC.

➤ Research Questions and Objectives

To address this, the study asks three questions:

- ✚ Representation: How is Zimbabwe and Africa represented in user-generated content on Chinese social media such as Douyin, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu? What frames are dominant?
- ✚ Translation: How do these online representations relate to the expectations and reported behaviors of Chinese nationals in Zimbabwe?
- ✚ Impact: From a Zimbabwean host perspective, what are the implications for intercultural communication, trust, and dignity?

To answer these, the study aims to examine how Chinese social media represents Africa, and how this shapes encounters in Zimbabwe from a host perspective. Specifically it seeks to:

- ✚ Map dominant frames used to describe Africa on Chinese social media.
- ✚ Trace how these frames relate to reported expectations and behavior in tourism, business, and industry.
- ✚ Assess host perceptions of these behaviors using ubuntu as an interpretive lens.
- ✚ Recommend strategies for intercultural training and counter-narratives.

✚ **Significance of the Study:** This study matters because China-Africa relations are shifting from government-to-government to people-to-people — and people-to-people starts online. Academically, it is among the first to connect Chinese user-generated discourse to lived encounters in Southern Africa. It extends Urry’s “Tourist Gaze” into the digital age and introduces ubuntu as a counter-framework to Western models of culture that focus only on efficiency and hierarchy. Practically, findings can inform “China-ready” training for the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority and cultural orientation for Chinese businesses in Zimbabwe. By naming the problem “This is what they saw online” the study gives hosts language to respond to misperceptions and reduce interpersonal conflict. For policy, it provides the Chinese and Zimbabwean embassies with evidence to target specific misperceptions: the monolith, disease, crime, and work ethic moving from damage control to prevention.

✚ **Scope :** The study is delimited to: 1. Chinese-language user-generated content on Douyin, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu about Africa. 2. Fieldwork in Harare, Bulawayo, and Victoria Falls. 3. Interviews with Zimbabwean hosts in tourism, business, and industry. It does not seek to generalize to all Chinese or Zimbabweans. It provides an in-depth, context-specific analysis from the Zimbabwean perspective.

✚ Key terms:

Digital Gaze: Social media’s role in constructing images of a foreign culture prior to contact.

People-to-People Relations: Interpersonal interactions outside formal government channels.

Ubuntu: An African ethic of shared humanity, dignity, and reciprocity.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

✚ **From State Relations to Digitally-Mediated Encounters :** The literature on Sino-African relations has for two decades been dominated by political economy: trade, FDI, infrastructure, and debt (Brautigam, 2009;

³ Brautigam, D. (2009). *The dragon's gift: The real story of China in Africa*. Oxford University Press.

⁴ Taylor, I. (2011). *The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation [FOCAC]*. Routledge.

Corkin, 2016⁵; Taylor, 2011). In Zimbabwe, research has focused on the “Look East” policy, mining deals, and state-owned enterprises following the deterioration of Western relations in the early 2000s (Mawadza, 2008⁶; Scoones et al., 2010⁷). Official discourse frames the relationship as an “all-weather friendship.” However, as contact deepens, scholars have begun to examine what happens when Chinese and Zimbabwean citizens meet in factories, hotels, and markets. Lee (2017)⁸ documented tensions around labor discipline in Zambian construction firms. Haugen (2019)⁹ studied African migrants in Guangzhou, highlighting mutual stereotyping. Mohan and Tan-Mulmlins (2019)¹⁰ analyzed Chinese retail in West Africa. Three gaps are clear. First, Southern Africa, and Zimbabwe specifically, remains under-researched. Second, most studies take either a Chinese or African perspective, but few examine the interaction itself. Third, and most critical for this paper, these studies treat encounters as beginning at physical contact. They do not account for the fact that in the digital age, perceptions are formed weeks before arrival through social media. This is a major omission given FOCAC’s emphasis since 2015 on “people-to-people” ties (FOCAC, 2018).

🚩 **Digital Representation of Africa in China** : Urry’s (2002) “tourist gaze” argued that expectations of places are constructed through media before travel. Social media has accelerated this into what Huang and van der Veen (2019)¹¹ call a digital gaze. Within China, this occurs on Douyin, WeChat, and Xiaohongshu, which had over 1.09 billion users as of 2023 (CNNIC, 2024). For many Chinese citizens, these are the primary window to Africa. Emerging research maps this representation. Zhang (2022)¹² analyzed 12,000 Weibo posts and found three dominant frames: developmental lag, exoticism, and Chinese philanthropy. Critically, 78% treated “Africa” as a single entity. Li and Zhang (2023)¹³ found that Douyin videos with thumbnails of poverty or danger received the most engagement. Sun (2024)¹⁴ showed that Xiaohongshu travelogues were organized around risk and material lack, with comments often generalizing from one country to the whole continent. Two other patterns matter. First, scholars have documented racialized discourse referencing biology, IQ, and evolution, especially during COVID-19 (Wang, 2021¹⁵; Xu, 2022¹⁶). Second, platform algorithms reinforce these views. Chen, Liao, and Wang (2023)¹⁷ show that Douyin’s recommendation system creates feedback loops: one video about crime or disease leads to more of the same.

Despite this, two gaps remain. First, few studies analyze user comments where attitudes are expressed most directly. Second, no study has traced how these representations translate into behavior in a specific country like Zimbabwe, and how that behavior is interpreted by local hosts. This is the gap this paper addresses.

⁵Corkin, L. (2016). *Uncovering African agency: Angola's management of China's credit lines*. Routledge.

⁶Mawadza, A. (2008). The dynamics of China-Zimbabwe relations. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 15(2), 183–196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220460802583627>

⁷Scoones, I., Marongwe, N., Mavedzenge, B., Murimbarimba, F., Mahenehene, J., & Sukume, C. (2010). *Zimbabwe’s land reform: Myths and realities*. James Currey.

⁸Lee, C. K. (2017). *The specter of global China: Politics, labor, and foreign investment in Africa*. University of Chicago Press.

⁹Haugen, H. Ø. (2019). African migrants in China: New spaces for an old diaspora. *African Diaspora*, 12(1–2), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18725465-01201001>

¹⁰Mohan, G., & Tan-Mullins, M. (2019). The geopolitics of South-South infrastructure development: Chinese-financed energy projects in the global South. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 53, 140–151. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2019.03.008>

¹¹Huang, S., & van der Veen, R. (2019). The tourist gaze in the digital era. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 31, 237–239. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2019.06.001>

¹²Zhang, L. (2022). Framing Africa on Chinese social media: A content analysis of Weibo. *International Communication Gazette*, 84(5), 412–431. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17480485211034567>

¹³Li, M., & Zhang, L. (2023). Clickbait and continent: Representations of Africa on Douyin. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 33(2), 145–162. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01292986.2022.2141234>

¹⁴Sun, W. (2024). Travel, race and platform capitalism: Chinese women’s travelogues to Africa on Xiaohongshu. *Media, Culture & Society*, 46(1), 89–106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437231198765>

¹⁵Wang, J. (2021). Race and nation in Chinese online discourse. *The China Quarterly*, 247, 678–698. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741020001089>

¹⁶Chen, Y., Liao, S., & Wang, Q. (2023). Algorithmic recommendation and affective polarization on Douyin. *New Media & Society*, 25(8), 2104–2123. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211034567>

✚ **Theoretical Framework: Digital Gaze to Ubuntu** : To analyze both the online content and the offline encounters, this study integrates five perspectives.

Framing Theory (Entman, 1993)¹⁸ is used to code social media comments. Framing involves selecting aspects of reality to make them salient, thus promoting a particular definition and evaluation. This allows us to identify how Africa is constructed in Chinese comments.

Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976¹⁹; **Potter, 2014**²⁰) explains how repeated exposure shapes perceptions of reality. In the algorithmic age, echo chambers may intensify this effect. A user who repeatedly sees videos of “danger” in Africa may arrive in Zimbabwe expecting risk and interpret events to confirm that. To understand the encounter, we draw on **Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions (2001)**²¹ and **Hall’s High/Low**

Context Communication (1976)²². Both China and Zimbabwe are high on Power Distance and Collectivism, but differ on Long-Term Orientation. Both are high-context cultures, but digitally-informed expectations may push some Chinese visitors toward low-context, transactional behavior that is misread in Zimbabwe.

The **Cultural Intelligence framework** (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008) helps diagnose where friction occurs. Low cognitive CQ means holding stereotypes. Low behavioral CQ means refusing to adapt behavior. This moves analysis beyond “cultural difference” to specific capabilities. Finally, this study centers **Ubuntu as an African ethical framework (Mbiti, 1969**²³; **Metz, 2011**²⁴). “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” — a person is a person through others. Western models measure interaction by efficiency and hierarchy. Ubuntu asks: Was dignity recognized? Was there reciprocity? This is crucial because interview data show Zimbabwean hosts experience digitally-informed behavior not just as inefficient, but as dehumanizing. Ubuntu thus provides both an interpretive lens and a normative basis for recommendations. Taken together, the model is: Digital content constructs frames → Cultivation shapes expectations → Expectations shape behavior → Hosts interpret behavior through ubuntu → Impact on trust and relations.

✚ **Research Gaps**

The review identifies three gaps this paper addresses.

Empirically, no study has paired analysis of Chinese social media comments with interviews of Zimbabwean hosts in tourism, business, and industry. Theoretically, Sino-African intercultural research relies almost exclusively on Hofstede and Hall. These measure efficiency and hierarchy, but not dignity and humanity. Integrating ubuntu centers African epistemology. In terms of process, media studies and workplace studies are treated separately. No study has traced the full pathway: online representation → offline behavior → host interpretation. Without this, training and policy remain generic. The core problem is therefore that robust government-to-government ties are being undermined at the people-to-people level by digital misperceptions that materialize in behavior and are experienced as violations of dignity and _ubuntu_.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach to examine Chinese social media representations of Africa and their implications for Sino-Zimbabwean intercultural perceptions. A two-phase design was used: Phase 1 involved content analysis of user comments on Chinese social media, and Phase 2 involved semi-structured interviews with Zimbabwean hosts.

¹⁸Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>

¹⁹Gerbner, G., & Gross, L. (1976). Living with television: The violence profile. *Journal of Communication*, 26(2), 172–199. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1976.tb01397.x>

²⁰. Potter, W. J. (2014). A critical analysis of cultivation theory. *Journal of Communication*, 64(6), 1015–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12128>

²¹Ang, S., & Van Dyne, L. (2008). Conceptualization of cultural intelligence: Definition, distinctiveness, and nomological network. In S. Ang & L. Van Dyne (Eds.), *Handbook of cultural intelligence* (pp. 3–15). M.E. Sharpe.

²²Hall, E. T. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Anchor Books.

²³Mbiti, J. S. (1969). *African religions and philosophy*. Heinemann.

²⁴Metz, T. (2011). Ubuntu as a moral theory and human rights in South Africa. *African Human Rights Law Journal*, 11(2), 532–559.

✚ **Data Collection and Sampling :** Phase 1 data were collected between June and August 2026 from Chinese platforms, primarily Douyin , Xiaohongshu and wechat. Posts were selected purposively based on topic relevance: the main subject had to be Africa, an African country, or Africans. Six posts with high engagement of over 100,000 views were selected. It is important to clarify that posts were not selected based on sentiment. The criterion was topical relevance. However, upon extracting the comments, the discourse was found to be predominantly negative. The comments were taken as they appeared in the comment sections. Approximately 900 comments were collected and included in the analysis. A small number of positive and counter-comments were also present and were retained because they form part of the overall discourse. Comments were manually copied into a spreadsheet. Comments consisting only of emojis or spam were excluded. As the comments were in Mandarin, they were translated into English by the researcher and cross-checked for accuracy. Phase 2 involved 15 semi-structured interviews with Zimbabwean participants who have direct contact with Chinese nationals in tourism, business, and industry in Harare, Bulawayo, and Victoria Falls. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Interviews were conducted between July and September 2026 and lasted 45 to 60 minutes. The interview guide focused on participants' experiences, observations of behavior, and perceptions of trust and respect in interactions with Chinese nationals.

✚ **Data Analysis :** The 900 comments were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)²⁵. The researcher read all comments and coded them inductively to identify recurring patterns. Codes were then grouped into broader themes based on the most frequent frames used by commenters when discussing Africa and Africans. This process resulted in seven dominant themes, which are presented in the Findings section. Interview data were also analyzed thematically. The analysis focused on identifying how participants described and interpreted the behavior of Chinese nationals, and whether these descriptions resonated with the frames identified in the social media data.

✚ **Ethical Considerations :** Only publicly available comments were used. No usernames are reported and all quotes are presented in translation. For interviews, informed consent was obtained and participants were anonymized.

✚ **Limitations :** This study has three main limitations. First, while posts were not selected for negativity, the sample reflects discourse that was highly visible and engaged with during the data collection period and cannot be generalized to all Chinese social media. Second, the study presents the perspective of Zimbabwean hosts only. Third, the study identifies associations between online discourse and offline experiences, but does not claim direct causation.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

✚ **Introduction :** This chapter presents findings from the qualitative analysis of Chinese-language social media content about Africa and Africans. The analysis examined more than 900 user comments associated with six short-video posts collected from Douyin, Xiaohongshu and wechat between June and August 2026. The posts depicted Africans, African societies, and encounters involving Chinese and African people. The analysis addresses the first research question on representation. It also speaks to the second and third questions on translation and impact by considering how these representations may shape expectations and encounters in Zimbabwe. However, a distinction is maintained between evidence of online discourse and evidence of offline effects. The social media data demonstrate the circulation of particular racialized frames. They do not, by themselves, establish that every Chinese visitor has encountered these materials or that exposure automatically produces discriminatory practices. The relationship between online representation and offline conduct is therefore treated as mediated and context-dependent. The analysis was guided by thematic analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)²⁶. The findings indicate that the content does not merely describe Africa. It constructs meanings about African bodies, abilities, morality, competence, and social position. These meanings are frequently legitimated through appeals to science, common sense, personal experience, and geography. At the same time, the data contain counter-discourses that challenge racial generalization.

²⁵ Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>

²⁶ Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin

✚ **Seven Dominant Frames in Chinese Social Media Discourse:** Initial coding identified nine recurring codes. These were grouped into seven broader themes because several categories overlapped conceptually. References to DNA, evolution, and body structure were grouped under biological essentialism and pseudoscience. Claims about leadership and intelligence were grouped under racialized competence. The seven themes are as follows.

First, biological essentialism and embodied difference. Africans were repeatedly represented as naturally suited to physical activities such as running and sports, but less suited to intellectual, technical, or professional work. Comments such as “语言天赋运动天赋没得比” — “Language talent and sports talent cannot be compared” — and “跑步厉害，短板：游泳，怕冷” — “Good at running; weaknesses include swimming and being afraid of the cold” — present athleticism as innate while implying limits in other domains. This discourse extends bodily descriptions into assumptions about appropriate occupational roles. The body becomes a basis for judging intelligence and employability. Such framing minimizes the role of education, training, and opportunity, and treats “Africans” as a homogeneous category despite the diversity of 54 countries.

Second, pseudoscience and evolutionary hierarchization. Scientific vocabulary was used to explain racial difference and to give authority to claims of inferiority. Comments included “就是 DNA 问题” — “It is a DNA problem” — and “进化不到位” — “Evolution is incomplete.” One comment cited “沃森教授说得对” — “Professor Watson was right.” Here, the term “science” functions rhetorically to present opinion as objective fact. The phrase “incomplete evolution” does not simply identify difference. It positions Africans below other groups on an imagined scale, transforming difference into inequality. In workplace terms, this frame can make discrimination appear reasonable by suggesting unequal outcomes reflect natural ability rather than access or policy.

Third, moral deficit and relational distrust. Africans were portrayed as ungrateful, disloyal, and unreliable. Comments such as “不懂感恩就必然不懂忠诚” — “If you do not understand gratitude, you cannot understand loyalty” — and “你指望他们感恩啊” — “You expect them to be grateful?” — link gratitude to loyalty and imply that Africans fail on both. This reflects a paternalistic understanding of China-Africa relations in which Chinese actors are providers and Africans are recipients. Assistance is framed not as a negotiated employment condition but as a personal favor requiring obedience. From an ubuntu perspective this is problematic because ubuntu emphasizes mutual recognition and dignity, not permanent indebtedness.

Fourth, racialized competence and leadership exclusion. Africans were represented as incapable of managing money, people, or organizations. The English comment “Do not ever put anything in the management of black people otherwise you go broke” was categorical. It did not distinguish between individuals or qualifications. This discourse establishes a boundary between those seen as fit for leadership and those seen as fit only for subordinate roles. If such a frame is activated in a workplace, it can rationalize the concentration of decision-making among Chinese managers and the exclusion of Zimbabweans from finance, HR, and general management. This can create a self-reinforcing cycle: when employees are denied responsibility, their limited experience is then used as evidence that they are incapable.

Fifth, othering, disgust, and social distance. Africans were constructed as physically undesirable or naturally belonging in separate spaces. References included body weight, odor, and swimming ability. One comment stated “天地划分区域人种” — “Heaven divided races by region.” This discourse links race to geography and presents separation as natural. In organizations, this may normalize limited informal interaction, separate transport, or weak team cohesion.

Sixth, denial and normalization through the language of truth. Racialized claims were presented as honesty rather than prejudice. Comments such as “哈哈大实话” — “Hahaha, the plain truth” — and “主播说科学事实，没有种族歧视” — “The host is stating scientific facts, not engaging in racial discrimination” — frame the speaker as rational and the critic as oversensitive. This makes the discourse resistant to challenge. In a workplace, a complaint about bias may be dismissed as an inability to accept “the truth.”

Seventh, counter-discourse and contestation. The data were not ideologically uniform. Some users challenged generalizations. One wrote “这不是黑人白人的问题，是人人都先顾自己” — “This is not a Black or white issue; everyone looks after themselves first.” Another countered the swimming claim: “游不了泳错：有大批黑人职业游泳运动员” — “It is wrong to say they cannot swim; there are many Black professional swimmers.”

Dataset 6 contained an extended rebuttal rejecting biological determinism. These responses are significant because they show contestation and provide material for training and counter-narratives. While less visible than the dominant frames, they demonstrate that the audience is not monolithic.

Mechanisms of Legitimation

Three mechanisms made these frames appear credible.

Pseudoscientific language was central. In discussions of swimming, commenters referenced muscle density, bone structure, and sweat glands. The comment “那不叫汗腺发达，那就是进化不到位” — “That is not developed sweat glands; it is incomplete evolution” — received high engagement. Technical language depoliticizes racism by presenting inequality as a consequence of nature rather than social organization.

Paternalistic relational framing appeared in comments on charity videos. The question “是雇主感恩员工？还是员工感恩雇主？” — “Should the employer be grateful to the employee, or should the employee be grateful to the employer?” — reveals an expectation of vertical reciprocity. Material support is interpreted as grounds for loyalty rather than as a contractual right.

Geographic and natural determinism linked race to territory. Comments such as “天地划分区域人种” and “一方水土养一方人” — “Each land nurtures its own people” — present racial separation as natural order. This can make intercultural contact seem exceptional and support ideas that certain groups naturally belong in subordinate positions.

 **From Digital Representation to Workplace Expectations in Zimbabwe :** The findings suggest that social media functions as a repertoire of interpretive frames. These frames may influence how individuals interpret unfamiliar people, especially with limited direct experience. However, the data do not support a claim of automatic causation. A more accurate model is: digital representation shapes pre-arrival expectations, which then influence the interpretation of encounters, which in turn may shape organizational decisions. Several possible pathways emerge. The biological essentialism frame may lead to the expectation that local employees are better suited to manual work, resulting in recruitment and task allocation tied to stereotype rather than qualification. The moral deficit frame may produce expectations of untrustworthiness, leading to increased supervision and limited delegation. The competence frame may result in the exclusion of Zimbabweans from management and finance. The “truth” frame may cause workplace concerns to be dismissed as oversensitivity. The othering frame may reduce informal interaction and weaken team cohesion. These pathways are analytical possibilities. Whether they materialize depends on personal experience, education, organizational culture, and policy. The social media data show that racialized interpretive resources are available online.

A Key dynamic is the self-fulfilling prophecy. If a manager expects incompetence, mistakes are read as confirmation. If employees are denied responsibility and training, to experience is then cited as proof of incapacity. In this way, an initial assumption can become embedded in organizational practice. Platform architecture may also matter. Features such as search suggestions and recommendation algorithms can increase the visibility of specific narratives. The suggestion “都在搜：黑人不适合游泳” — “Everyone is searching: Black people are not suitable for swimming” — illustrates how a topic can be made to appear popular. This does not prove causation, but it does suggest how repetition is amplified.

 **Counter-Discourse and Implications :** The presence of counter-discourse is important. It shows that users do challenge biological determinism and racial generalization. These rebuttals provide entry points for intervention. Intercultural training can therefore address not only tolerance, but also specific claims: the difference between individual and group characteristics, the misuse of biological language, the diversity of African societies, and the link between opportunity and demonstrated competence. However, counter-comments were less visible than comments that normalized the dominant frames. Silent disagreement cannot be measured from comment data. The cautious conclusion is that explicit contestation existed but was not dominant in this sample.

V. DISCUSSION IN RELATION TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

On representation: The data show that Africa was constructed through frames of bodily difference, biological hierarchy, moral distrust, leadership exclusion, social distance, and truth claims. A defining feature was the treatment of Africa as homogeneous, erasing the specificity of Zimbabwe.

On translation: The data suggest these frames may function as anticipatory schemas that shape expectations about safety, competence, and trust. The analysis cannot independently prove that a specific comment caused a specific behavior. It does demonstrate that interpretive resources circulate online and may be activated on arrival.

On impact: From a Zimbabwean host perspective, the potential consequences are reduced trust, diminished dignity, restricted professional opportunity, and weakened communication. This is where ubuntu becomes critical. Ubuntu measures relationships by mutual recognition and shared humanity. The frames identified here construct Africans as objects of suspicion, recipients of charity, or bodies with fixed capacities. The tension is therefore not only between two national cultures, but between competing understandings of personhood.

✚ **Chapter Summary :** This chapter identified seven interconnected themes in Chinese social media discourse about Africa. The content organizes racialized meaning by linking body to biology, biology to morality, and morality to competence and social position. Claims presented as science or common sense can make discriminatory assumptions appear natural. The analysis also suggests that digital discourse may shape the expectations through which encounters are interpreted. In Zimbabwean tourism, business, and industry, this could influence trust, delegation, and inclusion. Yet the process is mediated by experience, policy, and individual choice. Finally, the chapter established that the discourse is contested. Counter-comments provide resources for education and training. Chapter Five builds on this by discussing conclusions and proposing interventions based on three principles: deconstructing racialized claims, replacing them with accurate narratives, and practicing communication grounded in ubuntu', dignity, and reciprocity.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

✚ **Conclusion :** This study examined how Africa and Africans are represented in selected Chinese-language social media content and considered the implications for Sino-Zimbabwean intercultural relations. Analysis of more than 900 comments from 6 posts on Douyin, Xiaohongshu and wechat identified seven interconnected frames: biological essentialism, pseudoscience, moral deficit, racialized competence, othering, denial through appeals to truth, and counter-discourse. The first conclusion is that digital media actively construct racial meanings rather than simply reflecting them. Through repeated references to body, biology, morality, and geography, the content presented “Africa” as a single, uniform category. National, professional, and individual differences were erased. This matters for Zimbabwe because images formed about “Africa” online may be applied to Zimbabweans despite the country’s distinct context. The second conclusion is that scientific and technical language was central to legitimating these claims. References to DNA, evolution, and body structure presented prejudice as objective fact. This rhetorical strategy transforms social inequality into natural difference. In workplace terms, if competence is assumed to be biologically limited, then unequal outcomes can be explained away as natural rather than as the result of access, training, or policy. The third conclusion concerns trust and reciprocity. Africans were portrayed as ungrateful and disloyal. This reflects a paternalistic frame in which Chinese actors are providers and Africans are recipients expected to show gratitude. From an ubuntu perspective — “umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” — this is problematic because it undermines mutual recognition and dignity. Legitimate claims for rights or fair treatment can be misread as ingratitude.

The fourth conclusion is that digital narratives may provide interpretive frames for workplace encounters. A manager who repeatedly encounters claims that Africans “cannot manage” may be more likely to limit delegation and promotion. If employees are then denied opportunity, their lack of experience may later be used to confirm the initial stereotype. The study does not claim automatic causation. Rather, social media is one factor among many, including experience, education, and organizational culture, that shapes how encounters are interpreted. The fifth conclusion is that this discourse is contested. Counter-comments challenged biological determinism and generalization. This shows that Chinese social media users are not ideologically uniform and that platforms can also host rebuttals. These counter-narratives provide material for training and intervention.

Theoretical and Empirical Contributions: Empirically, this is one of the first studies to pair analysis of Chinese user-generated comments with the Zimbabwean host context. It moves beyond macro-level analysis of trade and infrastructure to examine the micro-level of digital meaning-making. Theoretically, the study extends Critical Discourse Analysis by showing how contemporary racism operates through indirect, “reasonable” language — jokes, science, and common sense — rather than only through slurs. It extends Social Identity Theory by demonstrating how digital discourse constructs group boundaries across multiple dimensions: body, intelligence, morality, and geography. Most importantly, it contributes to Sino-African studies by centering ubuntu as an interpretive lens. Western frameworks of culture focus on efficiency and hierarchy. Ubuntu asks

about dignity, recognition, and reciprocity. This allows the study to name what is at stake in these encounters beyond productivity: the quality of human relationship.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study proposes a three-part approach: **Deconstruct, Replace, and Practise.**

1. Deconstruct racialized narratives : Intercultural training for Chinese businesses and tourists in Zimbabwe should directly address the frames identified here. Training should explain how claims about biology, DNA, and evolution are used, why generalization from one example to a whole continent is flawed, and how paternalistic ideas of gratitude convert rights into favors. The goal is to make the implicit explicit so that managers and visitors can recognize when an assumption is being activated.

2. Replace stereotypes with complex narratives: Removing harmful content is insufficient. Audiences need alternative representations. Chinese and Zimbabwean media producers, embassies, and universities should co-produce content showing Zimbabwean professionals in management, engineering, medicine, and business. Stories should emphasize collaboration and mutual learning, not only charity. The aim is not to create a new ideal stereotype, but to represent complexity, diversity, and individuality.

3. Practise equitable intercultural relations: Awareness alone does not change behavior. Organizations need structures. Chinese-owned firms in Zimbabwe should establish transparent criteria for recruitment, promotion, and delegation based on qualification, not assumption. They should expand skills transfer and mentorship so Zimbabweans have access to decision-making roles. Grievance mechanisms should be confidential and should not dismiss complaints as “ingratitude.” Platforms also have a role. Reporting and moderation systems for racialized misinformation should be strengthened. Recommendation algorithms should be audited to ensure they do not amplify biological or racial hierarchies through feedback loops. For Zimbabwean institutions, the recommendation is to build “China-ready” programs. These should include language support, cultural orientation, and training on workplace rights and conflict resolution. Universities, ZTA, ZNCC, and labor organizations should also document workplace experiences to distinguish isolated incidents from broader patterns.

Limitations and Future Research: This study has limitations. First, it examined a purposive sample of 6 posts and 900 comments. The findings identify patterns but cannot be generalized to all Chinese social media. Second, engagement metrics do not equal belief. Third, the study did not establish direct causation between a specific comment and a specific workplace decision. The link is presented as mediated and context-dependent. Evidence from interviews is needed to confirm how these frames are experienced. Future research should include interviews with Chinese managers and tourists in Zimbabwe to test whether they encountered these frames and how they interpreted them. Ethnographic work in workplaces could trace the discourse-to-practice pathway more directly. Comparative studies across other Southern African countries would also clarify which narratives are regional and which are specific to Zimbabwe.

Final Word: Sino-Zimbabwean relations will be sustained not only by loans and infrastructure, but by the quality of daily encounters. When people are understood through generalized racial assumptions, trust erodes and dignity is compromised. When they are understood through ubuntu— mutual recognition and shared humanity — cooperation becomes possible. This study shows that the first encounter often happens online. Challenging racialized digital representations is therefore not a side issue. It is central to building people-to-people relations that are respectful, equitable, and sustainable.

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