

Introduction

African Literary Imaginaries of China

Is China's future African just as Africa's future is Chinese?¹ While this question may seem contentious, even absurd to some, the reality of the early twenty-first century suggests otherwise. I take up this contention by examining representations of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in sub-Saharan African literature, from the end of the Cold War into the 2000s. This scope encompasses how China, which emerged as a main engine of the world economy by the end of the twentieth century, transformed patterns of globalization across the continent. This era of multipolar globalization means that the West no longer holds a monopoly over the paths to so-called development. The comparison also reveals an alternative history of exchange between Africa and Asia as far back as the fifteenth century, capturing the symbolic points of reference for China's current investment in Africa.

To contextualize these symbolic relations, this introduction lays out the gap in Africa–China scholarship regarding the humanities and world literature particularly. The need for humanistic scholarship on Africa–China relations pinpoints how these exchanges are more than just economic or political; they are also linguistic and cultural. I also articulate how the book intervenes into African literary history. I detail my method of interpreting these texts according to frameworks that include the Cold War, Third Worldism, the Indian Ocean, and the Global South. These approaches enable how I read African literature beyond its conventional relationship with the former European colonizer and the West in general.² One main goal is to rework our understanding of postcolonial literature's "worldliness" by configuring it according to African literary imaginaries of China.

Postcolonialism accretes new textures – historical, racial, linguistic, cultural, and theoretical – when read against the backdrop of Africa–China relations. I examine how literature imagines and interrogates how Cold War revolutionary idealism became a full-fledged economic

pragmatism.³ I map how the discourse of anti-imperialism and Afro-Asian solidarity manifests as declarations of noninterventionism and mutual economic benefit, accompanying virtually every joint venture between the PRC and an African nation. By tracing this discourse through how it manifests in and is subverted by trope, I provide a nuanced examination of how China functions symbolically in sub-Saharan anglophone and francophone literature over the *longue durée* of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

Why Literature?

By the end of the 1990s, to predict that the PRC would dominate the global economy until the West would fret over the vestiges of, to invoke Fanon, a dying neocolonialism in Africa would have seemed like wild, unfounded speculation. Yet this prediction has already come true. From 2005 to 2018, China invested over 373 billion USD in Africa (North and sub-Saharan), representing just under 19 percent of its overall global investment.⁴ Nigeria (44.65 billion), Egypt (25.06 billion), Angola (24.09 billion), Ethiopia (23.74 billion), and Algeria (23.61 billion) lead the way. African investment is predictably lower: The United Nations (UN) estimates 14.2 billion in 2012, a 43 percent change from 9.9 billion in 2009.⁵ Trade with and China is at an all-time high, a little over 204 billion in 2018 alone. Although they compare fifty-four countries with a single country, export and import numbers are the most even in the past sixteen years. In 2018, China's exports to Africa were a little over 104 billion USD, while African exports to China reached just under 100 billion.⁶ The pace of trade hardly slowed during the 2008 global recession and the alleged trade war with China's primary manufacturing partner, the United States, in the late 2010s. The eastern coast of Africa is critical to China's resurrection of the Silk Road, the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).⁷

Even tightening political control in mainland China during the same period only buttresses a foreign policy that promotes, albeit through the rhetoric of nonintervention, governmental stability in African states as a means to protect investments – both long and short term. Despite contentious labor relations and accusations of corruption, African states and China are poised to make the continent the site of the next industrial revolution, somehow defying the ecological limits imposed by climate change and the global aftershock of COVID-19.

Why Literature?

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Global news media, government think tanks, NGOs, human rights organizations, and the academy turned their attention to this dynamic, scrutinizing whether China's presence in Africa is "good" or "bad." Predictably, their assessments largely reflected geopolitical allegiances, with individuals and organizations tacitly or explicitly supporting their nations' agendas and their requisite definitions of justice and progress. The discourse surrounding Africa–China relations remains fraught – at best by political intrigue and at worst by jingoistic diatribes. Despite inevitable exceptions (which I exemplify), Western opinions are plagued by colonialist echoes of the passive African submitting to the Chinese yellow peril.⁸ In contrast, Chinese outlets repeatedly affirm a shared history with Africa of the sordid experience of Western imperialism. They claim this commonality catalyzed the Afro-Asian solidarity of mid-twentieth-century decolonization, which blossomed into an Africa–China "friendship," exemplified by the declarations of mutual benefit accompanying virtually all joint ventures.

African opinions are more varied, reflecting the diversity expected from a continent with such heterogeneous histories and cultures. Copper mining dominated the Zambian experience, but the Senegalese hired Chinese construction companies to help build their Afro-futuristic municipal hub. In East Africa, the history of the Tanzania–Zambia Railway (TAZARA) impacts the reception of the Mombasa–Nairobi Standard Gauge and Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railways. Huawei's undersea fiber-optic networks connected South Africa, Nigeria, and the Congo-Brazzaville to Brazil, and their cheap household appliances and electronics flood almost every African city market.⁹ The long history of Chinese immigration to Johannesburg adds further complexity to Chinese investment in South African banking. China has also begun offshoring mature industries, such as leather-making and textiles, to obviate the creative destruction of Western-style neoliberalism.¹⁰ This strategy, often called the "flying geese" model, is derived from how the PRC became the offshoring site for Western and Japanese manufacturing, *par excellence*.¹¹ To move up the value chain, the PRC is now exporting industries that are no longer profitable in China (due to rising labor costs, overcapacity, etc.) to African states by establishing Special Economic Zones across the continent.

It is impossible to reduce the African experience of China to a single aspect, even if common themes appear across contexts. To assume China is monolithic is equally problematic. Besides the obvious differences of Taiwan's relations with African countries, Hakkan immigrants to Mauritius and southern Africa reflect Indian Ocean patterns of colonial labor, distinct from more recent immigration from, for example, the Fujian, Sichuan, and Henan provinces.¹² In addition, to assume a unilateral flow of

capital, goods, and people from China and to Africa effaces the substantial (at its height, 200,000–500,000 individuals) albeit precarious presence of Africans in Guangzhou, China. Many Africans are also in Chinese higher education and the business world.¹³ Limiting Africa–China relations to an analysis of state actors or multinational corporate interests de-emphasizes the human face of these sustained encounters.

The most dominant approach to Africa and China overwhelmingly remains political-economic, which interrogates trade policies and the conditions of concessional loans and capital investments in agribusiness, resource extraction, technology, light and heavy industries, and infrastructure.¹⁴ These studies often speculate about whether China is (re)building the international order, often referencing how China garnered African support for its permanent seat on the UN Security Council in 1971.¹⁵ Other studies documented how these relations impact soft power, labor practices, the nature of Chinese capital, human rights, and the social fabric of local and diasporic communities in African countries and China.¹⁶ While all these studies firmly established the subject's importance to scholarly inquiry and articulated key concepts, such as economies of scale, neoliberalism, and globalization in their Africa–China inflection, very few inquiries took up the topic outside of the social sciences.

In 2012, Simbao recommended a more expansive, humanistic approach, and two edited volumes began to map this dynamic.¹⁷ Banham (2016) touched upon the Ghanaian playwright Efua Sutherland and her possible reading of Chinese theater, especially in “The Marriage of Anansewa” (1975). Batchelor and Zhang (2017) explored media constructions in television, newspapers, cultural diplomacy, and nation branding but not literature, film, or the fine arts. World literature specialist Leman analyzed the Chinese imaginary in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), focusing on Asiatic themes, such as Buddhism.¹⁸ A scholar of comparative East Asia also urged “break[ing] discipline” in Africa–China studies, providing a survey of African and Chinese depictions of the other in their respective literatures (Thorner 2016: 694). Braun (2022) explored representation of African cultures in Chinese theme parks, and Huang (2022) wrote of the many China Malls in Johannesburg. Suglo (2022) described how African images are used in the PRC’s music industry.

A historian of ancient China, Wyatt, examined representations of the *kunlun*, or African slaves brought to Canton in the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE).¹⁹ South African scholar Hofmeyr writes in a book review that Ufrieda Ho’s memoir, *Paper Sons and Daughters: Growing Up Chinese in South Africa* (2012), “unsettle[s] simple notions of diaspora homeland

even as it ruptures ideas of South African belonging” (Ho 2011: 962). A scholar of the hispanophone African diaspora, Vasser, compares Ho’s memoir to the Zimbabwean Ken Kamoche’s novel, *Black Ghosts* (2013) by reading the politics of authenticity vis-à-vis assimilation, displacement, and myth-making, concluding that these patterns of movement might need “new etymologies and categorizations to express the emergent world order” (Vasser 2019: 13). Yuan (2020) wrote of how the myth of Zheng He functions in Owuor’s *The Dragonfly Sea*, and Shi (2021) analyzed tropes of humanization in Chipanta’s *A Casualty of Power* (2016). I also wrote articles on representations of China in African cultural production, analyzing the use of Maoism in African theories of decolonization and how authors imagine China in contemporary literature, reconfiguring the postcolonial novel from a Global South perspective.²⁰

Despite these groundbreaking studies, scholarship has not fully attended to how culture, and specifically African literature in both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, articulates the symbolic dimension of these many interactions. It focuses almost exclusively on Chinese representations or anglophone Africa. This study represents the first book-length monograph exploring the underexamined cultural field of Africa–China relations. By taking literature – anglophone and francophone – as the primary object of inquiry, it provides an in-depth and comparative investigation of how China circulates discursively in sub-Saharan African imaginaries, revealing how postcolonial identity and consciousness are recast through the variegated encounters between individuals, institutions, and the planet.

My approach builds upon a small but growing number of works that are reorienting postcolonial studies toward non-Western regions, interpreting African literature beyond how it subverts Western (neo)colonialism through recourse to local tradition and nationalist modernity. It also shifts scholarship on Africa and China away from PRC-centric analyses by placing African creative voices front and center in the polemics over whether China foreshadows either a “new colonialism” or a “win-win” for development. These texts defamiliarize the circuits of globalization by revealing postcolonialism’s inherent multipolarity. This literary analysis provides, quite simply, the *creative language* through which to conceptualize a new era in geopolitics and cultural exchange.

African Literature, Elsewhere

Although my initial intervention is to provide a book-length, humanistic approach to scholarship on Africa–China relations, I make an additional

intervention, split into three-parts, within the field of African literature. The overall intervention manifests in reading sub-Saharan anglophone and francophone African literature beyond how it imagines the former colonizer, Western neocolonialism, or Euro-America. Instead, I enact a 180-degree turn – toward East Asia – regarding its interpretative direction. This turn away from the West as a primary object of scholarly inquiry opens up a host of fresh comparisons, which not only provide new ways in which to understand the worlding of African literature but also, to paraphrase the epigraph, do the real work of decolonization by moving beyond the limitations of reading postcolonial identity only in opposition to the Western nation.

The first part of the intervention resides in foregrounding the history of what Westad called the “global Cold War,” particularly analyzing how the legacies of Afro-Asian solidarity and Third Worldism inform the contemporary worldings of sub-Saharan literature. My point of scholarly departure is the 2019 special edition of *Research in African Literatures*, “African Literary History and the Cold War.” In it, Popescu invites scholars to examine “the confluence of decolonization and Cold War studies,” employing a “Cold War lens” to illuminate epistemological gaps in research upheld by Area Studies paradigms in, primarily, the North American academy (Popescu 2012: 37; 2019: x). In reading the Cold War from a postcolonial perspective, as opposed to only a heavyweight fight between the United States and the Soviet Union, a variegated politico-cultural field emerges. African literature is a crucial site for understanding how intellectuals, politicians, writers, and artists manipulated Cold War blocs as they sought to decolonize and nationally self-determine.

A slew of essays and five recent monographs helped solidify this approach to African literature: Djagalov (2020), Shringarpure (2020), Popescu (2020), Watson (2021), Kalliney (2022). This book follows in their footsteps to “reveal the watermark left by the Iron Curtain in fiction, essays, and memoirs penned by intellectuals from the former colonies” (Popescu 2020: 2). While all five books feature insightful readings of the global Cold War in African literature – with emphasis placed upon local, American, and Soviet (among other) engagements – none include extensive discussion of the PRC’s role in African decolonization and theories of postcolonialism. My book fills this important gap by not only examining Maoism as a symbol in African literature but also demonstrating how these Cold War histories continue to inform how China circulates discursively in the contemporary moment.

The next part of this intervention draws from Indian Ocean studies, exemplified by Hofmeyr and her work on the Indian Ocean as a method, which “obliges us to extend our axes of investigation [to] pursu[e] productive postnational and post-area studies” that feature “lateral transnationalisms within a previously Third World space” and “within the Global South” (2012: 589). This longer view of Indian Ocean history “complicates any simple binaries” (Hofmeyr 2012: 589). I also take methodological cues from Desai (2013); he examines narratives by the South Asian diaspora in East and Southern Africa. He theorizes syncretic identities created by the movement back and forth across the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean provides a robust framework to think through previous eras of African globalization and defamiliarizes the conventional circuits of European colonialism by privileging the regions of Eastern and Southern Africa. This scholarship provides a template for how alternative networks of globalization, diaspora, and geography configure and are configured by African literature. While the Indian Ocean provides an important interpretative framework, I also perform comparative, non-Western readings of texts from Western and Central Africa: from nations whose relation to the Indian Ocean, however important, is more oblique. My book deepens this turn by pushing the interpretative boundaries of the Indian Ocean farther east to focus on China.

By decentering the terracentricity of analytical frameworks, the Indian Ocean also suggests a more planetary focus. The book also draws from recent scholarship on African literature and the environment, particularly Iheka (2017). Given that one of the main sites of contention about the Chinese presence in Africa is resource extraction, I take seriously Iheka’s exhortation “to see and relate with the plants and animals, lands and forests around us as constitutive of the living world and not as mere resources for indiscriminate exploitation” (Iheka 2017: 5). By juxtaposing this ecological focus against the classic narrative matrices of space and time, my readings demonstrate how the Afro-Chinese worlds that these texts imagine are configured by not only interactions between humans but also how they relate to the natural world and the “deep time of planet earth” (Dimock 2008: 6).

The last part of my intervention addresses Global South studies. Although not under the rubric of Global South studies, Lionnet and Shih’s (2005) watershed volume paved the way by examining “horizontal” interactions, which take a common history of European imperialism as only one point of departure (Lionnet and Shih 2005: 11). This approach compares minority literatures and ethnicities in the West as they relate to

each other, retaining the nation as an analytical category only as a strategy to argue for inclusive citizenship. While “minor transnationalism” focuses primarily on “minor-to-minor” interactions, Global South studies opens the framework outside of one that is always somehow mediated by a Western and white majority (Lionnet and Shih 2005: 8).

Less a geography than a concept, “Global South” found considerable purchase as an alternative configuration of postcolonialism. Most recently, Menon wrote that it “is an attempt to think societies and politics in their own terms and from within their concepts” and that it pushes back against how “Concepts from Asia and Africa are seen as mired in particularism; the fact that the idea of universals is merely a self-regarding European nativism” (Menon 2022: 160, 159). The scholar of East African literature West-Pavlov calls it a “shifter” term because it works “like a deictic marker, linking discourses, places, and speakers [so] as to generate new subject positions, fields of agency, and possibilities of action” (2018: 2). Bystrom and Slaughter consider Africa and South America through the lens of the Atlantic Charter, calling the South Atlantic both a “geopolitical *region*” and “a *vision*, an ideal or aspiration of solidarity and interconnection” (2017: 9). Armillas-Tiseyra deepens this South Atlantic line of inquiry by arguing for the dictator novel as a critical genre of the Global South.²¹ Another space-clearing intervention about the Global South is analyses of the Egyptian based literary magazine *Lotus*, foundational in theorizing decolonization in the latter half of the twentieth century.²²

While to call China a member of the Global South in the early 2020s is fraught at best, the PRC remains a critical catalyst for the emergence of “Global South” as a viable label. For better or for worse, China’s rise disrupted the Western-centric geopolitical hierarchy dominating the world order since the high period of European imperialism. It is not so far-fetched to claim that the Global South partly emerged as a term to grapple with how the PRC is currently reshuffling that world order, especially in regions that designate themselves as postcolonial. African literature provides an arresting site of analysis to understand the symbolic dimensions of this Global South shift.

History and Symbol in Africa–China Relations

I focus upon anglophone and francophone literature from sub-Saharan Africa not only because of my own training as a literary critic but also due to how the chosen texts complicate representations of China through characterization and genre. However, I do not provide an exhaustive

inventory of literary texts from the entire continent that take up the theme of China. Nor am I interested in only finding the “heroes” and “villains” of Africa–China relations. The former approach would be methodologically foolhardy, and the latter would promote an intellectual reduction that jingoistic politics of all stripes could easily instrumentalize. Instead, I organize chapters around key themes and figures. This focus demonstrates how postcolonial literary genres in Africa impact, and are impacted by, a sustained engagement with China as a symbol.

Each chapter considers the Africa–China dynamic in a unique way and so is organized in sections focusing on one text at a time. I provide clear points of access for readers who may be interested in a particular author, narrative, or nation. My analysis thus moves across many countries on the continent. By putting the chapters in discrete sections, I historicize each text according to its nation’s past and present engagement with the PRC, or more capaciously, China. This approach crystallizes the very literary question: from where and to whom are these texts speaking? The intended effect of historicizing my readings is to evince the symbolic ramifications of China in each national context, so that historians, social scientists, and even political economists might bring the cultural dimension’s affective weight to bear on how they examine relevant topics.

I employ a method akin to what Jameson calls the “*concept of history*” (1984: 180). Instead of simply listing, chronologically, the events comprising the content of Africa–China relations, my analysis moves back and forth between events as they allegedly happened, their often-politicized interpretations, and, through close readings, their symbolic/philosophical dimensions in literature.²³ I capture how seemingly disparate events in different places were connected both materially and conceptually and demonstrate how cultural phenomena are not only informed by but also inform the circumstances of the event itself. My method is thus chiasmic: history catalyzes art, just as art catalyzes history.²⁴ Of particular utility is also how Jameson describes the “shadowy but central presence” of Maoism to the global 1960s (Jameson 1984: 188). This book examines the *symbol of Maoism* in African literature. Yet, and as it will become quite clear, this “symbolic Maoism” is hardly the only symbolic dimension of Africa and China relations (Jameson 1984: 180). Others include the Cold War, pan-Africanism, resource extraction, the diasporic journey, and racial ambiguity.

This interdisciplinary and wide-ranging approach both constrains and expands my argument. For example, readers may wonder why I do not examine Angolan Third Worldism, Guinea-Bissau’s Amílcar Cabral, or

how the Liberation Front of Mozambique engaged Maoism. Much remains to be done on the worlding of Luanda's Elinga Theatre or how Cabral and Mondlane engaged Maoism to theorize anticolonialism.²⁵ Because Angola receives, by far, the most contemporary investment from the PRC on the continent, their bilateral relations are arguably the most critical to understand. Sun (2020) examined how Maoism was interpreted by the Angolan poet and nationalist Viriato da Cruz, who lived as an exile in the PRC from 1966 to 1973. I also analyze the politics of language in each chapter, but my basic Swahili is insufficient to read a text completely in an indigenous African language. I would be more than interested in examining how Maoism was discussed in Swahili in, for example, University of Dar es Salaam's radical student journal, *Maji Maji*. Or, in another indigenous language context, how Amharic texts engaged Ethiopian Marxism and Afro-Asian solidarity. Arenberg (2019) and Lal (2014) describe how Tanzania's Nyerere drew from Maoism to conceptualize *ujamaa* in the Arusha Declaration of 1968. Bach wrote of how the malleability of Ethiopian *abyotawi*, or democracy, was derived from "Leninism, Marxism, Maoism, and liberalism" (2011: 641). While these limitations affect the book's scope, reading Mandarin means I can unpack an entirely new dimension of the politics of language in anglophone and francophone African literature.

Last, a note on positionality: as a US scholar who teaches in the Western academy, I feel there always exists a tension regarding writing about postcolonial literature from the African continent. As a person of color in the West, I chose this topic partly due to my personal experience in various African countries. Although I am mixed race (Korean and white), I present as East Asian, whatever that may mean. My physical appearance means I am often mistaken for Chinese almost everywhere I go in Africa. This disconnect between my own identity and how I am perceived fundamentally informs my scholarship, especially concerning race and racism. I hope to have brought an attitude of tempered self-reflexivity to my approach, which rejects reducing the complexity of another's identity and culture to suit my own ends.

The Alluvial as a Key Concept

I use several terms to theorize the symbolic dimensions of Africa–China relations; however, the term that bears most of the conceptual weight is the alluvial.²⁶ Each chapter explores the term in its various symbolic capacities and so conceptualizes it in greater complexity and nuance. *I define the*