

“What People, What Cultural Exchange? A Reflection on China-Africa

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At this point (and to the audience of this publication), that China has a presence in the African continent is well known. In the Eastern Cape of South Africa, due to my research on new Chinese migrants, those arriving in the 1990s and 2000s, in the province, someone is likely to tell me that there are Chinese people even in the remotest villages in the (former) Transkei area. Although the impression is that they are everywhere, when I would ask where exactly are the Chinese people located, except for those who come from the surrounding areas of Dimbaza where Taiwanese-owned factories were once located, very few people can provide a clear answer. If the truth were told, except for those who work for Chinese employers, the few returning customers who make the effort to talk with the Chinese entrepreneurs, and students and lecturers at schools where there are international students from China, the majority of the local people in South Africa and the Eastern Cape, in

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particular, have not seen a Chinese person and fewer know of or has close ties with a Chinese person.

Unlike other African countries, South Africa has a longstanding Chinese presence, since the arrival of the Dutch East India Company in the 17th century (Park; 2008, Yap and Man; 1996). European colonialism, but also the development of industrial (mining) capitalism in South Africa, 20th-century international warfare (including the Cold War), and policies of racial segregation as well as decisions of the post-apartheid governments have influenced the ebb and flow of Chinese people as slaves, convicts, and indentured labourers (Harris; 2006, Huynh; 2008) and as independent merchants to South Africa up until the present time (Huynh, Park, and Chen; 2010). The various Chinese communities (e.g., South African-born, Taiwanese, and Mainland Chinese) that have settled in the country over four centuries show a long-term historical connection between China and South Africa. That there is still little knowledge about this population raises concerns about how the nation-state has been constructed up until now, but, more importantly, is a reflection of the way in which race has manifested in the country. In the latter, race continues to be viewed as mostly consisting of two racial groups, ‘black’ and ‘white’. In this bipolar schema, Asians (in South Africa, this category refers to Indians, but here I include Chinese) are perpetual foreigners regardless of their place of birth or citizenship status.

Regardless of the real, imagined, or hearsay presence of Chinese people in any particular place in South Africa, opinions about them are manifold. The gamut of opinions available in the streets includes: the availability of cheap Chinese manufactured goods allows (mainly, poor)

people to consume things that they otherwise would not have been able to afford, Chinese businesses create employment opportunities, Chinese entrepreneurs exploit local people by paying low wages and selling low-quality goods that are not durable, Chinese traders are competing with locals for economic opportunities, and Chinese people are kung-fu fighters. With the exception of the last stereotype, which is influenced by an explosion of Bruce Lee and Chinese (i.e., Hong Kong) martial arts films in South Africa in the 1990s (about 20 years after television was introduced to the country), the opinions are mostly formulated around economic activities like competition, consumption, and employment. Though these opinions contradict one another as well as affirm and conflate with views about China's present influence in Africa that are expressed by the Western media, local policy elites, political and economic analysts, unions, and civil society, they have yet to crystallize into an anti-Chinese sentiment. Nonetheless, whether the opinions appear to be positive or critical, what has oftentimes been neglected is that linguistic differences, cultural particularities, and enduring stereotypes generated by the West have contributed to half-truths that have come to represent the whole country of China, so massive and so culturally embellished, and the people.

International scholars and the Chinese government have attempted to broaden the discourse on relations between China and Africa, filling in gaps with meticulous research and counterbalancing some of the assumptions used to describe the relationship that have seemingly become quotidian. While the national government of China has been presenting a discourse of brotherhood and friendship that emanated from the Bandung Conference in the 1950s, the academic literature on China-Africa relations has been increasing rapidly outside of Africa

since 2005. The most analysed are the figures for trade and foreign direct investment (primarily in resource extraction) (Large; 2008: 55) and Chinese development aid in Africa (Brautigam; 1998, Tan-Mullins, Mohan, and Power; 2010), all of which all have expanded tremendously within the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) framework that was initiated in 2000 by China and a few African countries. The research details the various economic and development activities, demonstrating nuances, as well as situates them in a historical and global political context that includes America and a number of European countries. It also addresses the areas where the engagement is uneven, but in addition concludes that African political elites need to step up to negotiate better deals with their Chinese partners, be they government or private actors. The strength of the research that sheds new light on what could be referred to as a political-economy of China-Africa relations is also its weakness, which is the people who have accompanied and been affected by the circulation of manufactured goods and capital.

Scholars in disciplines like anthropology, geography, history, linguistics, and sociology have started to examine the crucial connections that people are making in contemporary China-Africa relations. Research that focuses on migration flows and migrants exposes that migration has been occurring in both directions, with Africans increasingly going to do business, study, work, and settle in China (Bodomo; 2012, Haugen; 2012, Mathews; 2011). Also, it details the diverse Chinese actors who come from various parts of China and are creating new Chinese communities or renewing and reconfiguring long-established ones in various African countries (Bourdarias; 2010; Esteban; 2010, Mohan and Kale; 2007, Huynh, Park, and Chen; 2010). The studies not only show

that 'China' and 'Africa' are not homogeneous entities, but also elucidate the complexity of China-Africa relations at the ground level, where people come into contact, especially through the market, on a daily basis.

As part of this growth in research focus, an interest in African perceptions of China's presence in Africa has also materialised (Rebol; 2010). This intervention is significant, as it aims to give voice to Africans. However, the fact that such research relies on surveys that oftentimes ask questions kindled by the Western media, which broadly situate China as a foe or friend and a challenge or model (Sautman and Yan; 2007), reinforces the power of the media. While the questions raised indicate the extent of the media's influence in shaping competing perceptions, the respondents appear to have little opportunity to reflect on whether she or he knows China or Chinese people and what informs her or his knowledge (even if it includes media coverage, local rumour mills, and past memories). Nonetheless, as new research is trying to fill in gaps in available knowledge and data, correct misconceptions, and strike a balanced view by doing larger, longer-term studies as well as tapping into Chinese and African sources, the research, as one scholar rightly notes, '[must reach] beyond concerns that dominate headlines and [address] a broader range of issues' (Large; 2008: 58); that includes examining the issues of linguistic differences, cultural particularities, and existing stereotypes that have also shaped China-Africa relations in crucial ways or investigating the kinds of cultural productions (including myths and symbols) that the relationship has enabled.

Gauging from her disciplinary background in African Art History, Simbao (2012: 1) makes a similar point: ‘Until recently little in-depth research has existed on human relationships at an individual or community level, and even less research exists on China-Africa engagement in terms of culture or the visual arts’. And, if people unselfconsciously look for other modes of communication like body language and drawing when language fails, then Simbao is right about the gap in the present China-Africa literature and the relevance of culture and the arts in relations building¹. There has been more focus on China’s FOCAC commitments to political and economic cooperation with African countries and less on the inclusion of the objective to strengthen cultural exchange as an area for cooperation. China only acknowledged the relevance of people-to-people and cultural exchange with Africa at the second FOCAC conference in Addis Ababa in 2003, suggesting that a focus on politics and economics alone was insufficient in the development of China-Africa relations.

Early ideas on how to achieve this end included training African professionals, expanding tourism, and hosting an African arts as well as China-Africa youth festival in China². At the 2006 FOCAC meeting in Beijing, the activities came to include sending Chinese agricultural experts and volunteers to Africa, setting up agricultural centres, hospitals and rural schools, and increasing the number of Chinese government scholarships for African students to study in China. Additionally, a number of African youths were invited to visit China to participate in the China-Africa youth festival and several Confucius Institutes (CIs) were set up to teach Chinese language and culture in African schools (South Africa alone has at least three Confucius Institute; overall, however, the number of CIs in other regions is much larger than in Africa). By the

fourth FOCAC meeting in 2009 in El Sheikh, a proposal was introduced to create a joint research and exchange programme to provide a platform for African and Chinese scholars as well as analysts of think tanks to have more exchanges and collaborate in formulating better cooperation policies. As part of this initiative, from 28-29 March 2011, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) facilitated a meeting with representatives of African and Chinese academic institutions, think tanks, and policy makers in Nairobi, Kenya³. Notwithstanding the theme of understanding China-Africa relations, the conference concluded with a general consensus that more knowledge about China was necessary, rather than with a research programme to strengthen African people's participation. Nonetheless, among these activities that aimed to extend people-to-people and cultural exchange, the establishment of CIs in a number of African countries (Akelo; 2009, French; 2006, Gil; 2009, Magistad; 2011, Paradise; 2009, Simons; 2009) has received more attention than other social development projects as well as student exchanges and scholarships (King 2010). Receiving least attention have been the culture weeks and arts festivals that are equally influential in shaping views about particular cultures and peoples.

There have been numerous festivals and art shows held in African countries and China, and African artists have been hosted in China as a result of China's African visiting scholars programme. Among them, the 'African Culture in Focus' event in 2008, sponsored by the Chinese Ministry of Culture, was significant. A *China Daily* article reports that it consisted of exhibitions, dance performances, and conferences about African art from 29 African countries, as well as hosting African artists in Shenzhen to teach painting ('Out of Africa' 2008). Of similar

importance is the 'Chinese Culture in Focus' event that took place in 2009 in 20 African countries. The *People's Daily* reports that it 'show [ed] unique Chinese tradition and culture in all aspects' ('Cultural Exchange'; 2009); it does not detail what aspects of Chinese culture were on display. The creation of a platform for Chinese and African performance ensembles, different genres and scales of art exhibitions, and the training of artists and performers does indeed encourage cultural engagement among the artists and between the artists and spectators. However, in such a state-initiated framework as FOCAC (almost reminiscent of the mid-19th-century world fairs), it is necessary to continue to ask ourselves: who is allowed to represent or give meaning to and interpret China-Africa on the one hand, and on the other hand, what gets presented as Chinese or, even, as African culture (the 'real China' or 'real Africa')? And, if the created platform is reducible to propaganda, rather than a product of a 'creative, imaginative, and undogmatic mind' (Robinson; 1980: 353), for whom is it really directed towards? Furthermore, are there multiple cultural authorities or a singular one? The scale and scope of cultural exchange should ideally attract more attention and analyses, especially the meanings of China and Africa or Chinese-ness and African-ness that are being produced.

As pointed out by Wallerstein (1990: 33), culture is puzzling because the concept is used to signify two phenomena: it is 'the set of characteristics which distinguish one group from another, and . . . some set of phenomena which are different from (and 'higher' than) some other set of phenomena within any one group'. While we can refer to the first as 'national culture' and the second as 'local cultures', it is not as easy to define the 'group' (national or local) due to various factors like gender, ethnic, racial, and age differences; policies put in place by various levels

of government to regulate people's mobility; definitions of citizenship, etc. As mentioned above, China is vast, but so is the African continent in its diversity, so to get a sense of the places, peoples, and cultures, it is necessary to engage China-Africa at a number of levels, including the visual and performing arts, in a way that entails thinking and seeing what is there and what is not there (Sullivan; 2010: 133). Here, if art (in all its forms) is one expression of the culture of a particular society or group of people and engages, confronts, and reflects the actual events of its time, should 'traditional' art that appears to be (temporally) static, such as masks, dances of cultural groups, and images of wild landscapes, as well as acrobatics, calligraphy, and martial arts, be the predominant representations of China and Africa? Does it adequately represent the culture of a people as they are now? This is not to suggest that, as spectators or consumers of art, we have to choose one over the other, but a suggestion to deepen our understanding in order to simultaneously demystify and develop a more accurate diagnosis of China-Africa.

For instance, in the 'Making Way' exhibition that Simbao curated in 2012, artists like Gerald Machona, a Zimbabwean visual and performing artist who now lives in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape, and Lebogang Rasethaba, a South African filmmaker, directly take up the heady issue of China-Africa relations in ways that do not invoke 'African tradition'. Specifically, Machona utilizes and transforms the conventional use of national currencies to home in on the issue of territorial boundaries (and one could even add trade relations) while Rasethaba draws from his first-hand experience as a student in Beijing to highlight the linguistic and cultural challenges of resettlement as well as differences among Africans abroad. New consciousness and ways of being emerge through the art-

ists' engagement with China-Africa. In a way, their works could be viewed as political, but they are also chronicles and interpretations of the ways in which Africans, in particular, experience China-Africa. However, in the case of China, though contemporary art has mushroomed in the post-New China period after 1989 and parodies China's transforming political life and consumer society (Lu; 1997)⁴ like in the photographs by Shanghai-born artist Maleonns shown in the abovementioned exhibition, one has to still ask what is the role of such art in conversations about China-Africa if it were to be concerned about China's and the Chinese people's relations with the broader world? Thus far, in spite of all its diversity inside and outside of China, it is primarily the acrobatics and cultural dance troupes, calligraphy, and martial arts that have been given the task of expressing Chinese culture and experience in Africa; these 'classical' (and once treated as bourgeois) expressions disregard the fact that the various Chinese actors, especially the new migrants who are gradually settling, in Africa have developed a psychic and cultural identity independently of the one put forth by the state. Finally, while African artists are going to China to exchange with and learn from Chinese artists, perhaps the flow of artists needs to go from China towards the direction of Africa, too.

End Notes

¹ From an energy policy and management standpoint, Feng and Mu (2010) begin to highlight the importance of knowing local cultures to reduce investment risks of Chinese companies in capital-intensive industries, such as oil, on the continent.

² www.focac.org. Accessed 4 June 2012

³ www.codesria.org. Accessed 4 June 2012.

⁴ China's contemporary art artists have more exposure in Hong Kong and other major cities in Europe and America than in China.

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