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International
Institute for
Asian Studies

African Studies in China

Cheryl M. Schmitz



A few years ago, I sat in on a graduate seminar on ethics and globalization at a major university in Beijing. The course was taught by a Chinese professor who had done extensive fieldwork in locations ranging from Angola to Ethiopia. More than half of the students in the classroom had also lived in various African countries. They had spent years working at construction companies, charity organizations, or diplomatic offices, and they were now being trained as a new generation of area studies experts.

Scholars gather for discussion at the Center for African Studies, Sun Yat-sen University.

The beginning of the twenty-first century saw an explosion in popular and academic publications on connections and reconnections between China and the African continent. What has attracted less attention, however, is how Chinese academic interest in African Studies has grown alongside diplomatic relations and commercial ties. Africanists in China are building unique academic programs, often based on fieldwork or other on-the-ground experience and in collaboration with African scholars and institutions. Programmatic emphases are often explicitly contrasted against Western traditions of studying Africa, said to have been closely linked to colonial or neo-colonial projects.

In China, the first academic institutions devoted to the study of Africa or of Afro-Asian



A corner of the Institute for African Studies, Zhejiang Normal University.

connections were set up in the 1960s, with the official aim of supporting anti-colonial liberation movements. Recent years have seen the opening of a number of new African Studies centers and institutes, amounting to at least twenty, with over half established within the past two decades. These centers host meetings for scholarly exchange and facilitate the dissemination of written publications and visual media related to Africa and Africans. The Belt and Road Initiative has been accompanied by government support for the study of the Global South, opening up resources for collaborations with African universities and new possibilities for overseas fieldwork by Chinese researchers.

The contributions to this issue of *China Connections* provide a range of perspectives on recent developments in African Studies

in China. The authors highlight some themes that distinguish Chinese Africanism, such as Chinese business and migration networks in Africa or African commercial activity in China. They also raise important political and theoretical questions about the future of the field. Indeed, contemporary Chinese connections to Africa can no longer be thought of as restricted to the economic sphere. Scholars based in China continue to actively produce knowledge about the African continent, and it will be important to consider the implications of this intellectual work.

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Amidst a China-Africa cultural boom

Ehizuelen Michael Mitchell Omoruyi

Communication between China and Africa has become more frequent in recent years, as many Africans move to China with the hope of fulfilling their dreams. China and Africa, both of which possess a rich cultural heritage, learn more about each other and in turn develop a mutual appreciation and fondness. Out of the common aspiration to further strengthen traditional ties of friendship and promote mutually beneficial cooperation between Africa and China, the Institute of African Studies at Zhejiang Normal University stands out by serving as a platform for cultural exchange and by contributing to a new historical stage for the development of China-Africa cultural relations.

Last year, I wrote an article for the *China Daily* where I described how students at Jinhua Qiubin Primary School in Zhejiang province, China, leapt into the air in a typical African dance routine. The dance was accompanied by the sounds of African instruments, ranging from the mbira from Zimbabwe to specially-designed West African congas. These instruments were so loud and clear that visitors from Africa momentarily forgot they were in far-away China. This is the power of cultural diversity.

Recently, Chinese activities in many African nations have expanded from economic to cultural exchanges, allowing Chinese people to gradually learn more about Africa and its people. The African museum at Zhejiang Normal University and the Jinhua Qiubin primary school both contribute to

the blossoming of China-Africa cultural relations. Since 2015, the primary school has adopted a special type of education that focuses on African culture, the first of its kind in China and a symbol of the symbiotic relationship between Africa and China. The African museum at the Institute of African Studies was the first to be established at a higher education institution in China. It has the largest collection of African artifacts and foreign art at any university since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. I was amazed the first time I came to the Institute to find such a museum in China. Through cultural exchange, the Institute of African Studies is able to teach Chinese people that Africa is not only a cradle of civilization but also a rising continent.

From afar, one sees that the building housing the museum is itself a piece of art. When entering the structure, one encounters diverse artifacts offering various perspectives. This is how traditional African landscape paintings should be experienced, through free shifts of perspective. China and Africa need new possibilities for aesthetic appreciation

and spiritual fulfillment. The Jinhua Qiubin Primary School, meanwhile, has embraced all aspects of African culture, including face painting, designing tribal clothing, manufacturing African musical instruments, and constructing thatched huts. The pupils make masks out of cardboard using designs from different parts of Africa. Anyone who visits the primary school will be amazed at what the pupils do with African arts, fabrics, hair weaving, sculpting, and African musical instruments. The Institute of African Studies has been behind these cultural efforts, trying to show to the African people how the Chinese people respect and appreciate their arts and culture. As people from China and Africa continue to communicate, there will be a cultural awakening, and the Chinese and African people will soon be able to appreciate the great cultural heritage of both sides.

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Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai

The Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai serves as the hub within the NYU Global Network University system to promote the study of Asian interactions and comparisons, both historical and contemporary. The overall objective of the Center is to provide global societies with information on the contexts for the reemerging connections between the various parts of Asia through research and teaching. Collaborating with institutions across the world, the Center seeks to play a bridging role between existing Asian studies knowledge silos. It will take the lead in drawing connections and comparisons between the existing fields of Asian studies, and stimulating new ways of understanding Asia in a globalized world.

Asia Research Center at Fudan University

Founded in March 2002, the Asia Research Center at Fudan University (ARC-FDU) is one of the achievements of the cooperation of Fudan and the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies (KFAS). Through the years, the center is making all the efforts to promote Asian Studies, including hosting conferences and supporting research projects. ARC-FDU keeps close connections with the ARCs in mainland China and many institutes abroad.



A Chinese migrant in Tanzania: Jackey Zhou

LI Xiangyun

Fishermen in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Reproduced under a CC license, courtesy Rajesh India on Flickr.

Jackey Zhou studied French at Yunnan University in the early 1990s. After graduation, he worked for a pharmaceutical company in Kunming. In 1999, the young Jackey Zhou was sent by this company to work in, what he would later describe as, “the mysterious continent of Africa”. Thus began his life in Africa, which lasted for nearly two decades.

When he first arrived on the continent, Jackey Zhou worked as a salesman of artemisinin, an antimalarial. He still remembers the experience of being robbed for the first time. On the morning of 9 April 2000, he was walking on Karl Marx Street in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique, taking photos of the scenery. Suddenly, three young black men rushed forward, pushed him to the ground, and stole his camera. At first he was scared, but then he jumped up and chased after the men to get his camera back. The price he paid was a seriously injured right thumb. Later, he settled in Tanzania to marry and have children. He no longer impulsively chased thieves.

Jackey Zhou has two children, a handsome boy and a pretty girl, both born and raised in Tanzania. They study at international schools and are fluent in Chinese and English. To maintain the children's Chinese language skills, Jackey Zhou and his wife speak Chinese with their children at home. He has also invited Chinese students from the University of Dar es Salaam to teach his children Chinese at home. In addition, he takes his children back

to his hometown every year. Besides visiting relatives and friends, he has also traveled with his children all around the motherland.

Jackey Zhou is a warmhearted person. He has several good Chinese friends in Tanzania. They all came to Tanzania in the 1990s and struggled from youth to middle-age. During the Spring Festival, they gather at Jackey Zhou's home. His virtuous wife prepares a full table of dishes. Everyone drinks wine, talks about the world, and enjoys each other's company. Jackey Zhou's home also serves as a temporary hotel for good friends visiting Dar es Salaam, or for those who have had too much to drink. Every Chinese scholar who has done research in Tanzania in the early 21st century knows of Jackey Zhou.

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This essay is based on the author's fieldwork in Tanzania, conducted in 2016, for the project “Chinese Immigrants in Tanzania”.

The Center for African Studies at Yunnan University (CASNU) is an academic institution specializing in African research and talent cultivation. Currently there are 7 full-time researchers and 10 part-time researchers, with 26 Master's and Doctoral candidates at the center. The center has also invited experts and scholars to form an academic committee, which is chaired by Professor Liu Hongwu.

A summary of research on Africans at SYSU in Guangzhou, China

Daming Zhou

Known as the pilot site of China's reform and opening up, and the “workshop of the world”, Guangzhou is attractive for its low cost of living, proximity to manufacturing suppliers, and as host to the Canton Fair. Contemporary African immigration to Guangzhou began in the late 1990s and reached its peak in the year 2010. According to official statistics, there were 11,000 Africans living in Guangzhou, while the number of inbound African tourists was over 500,000 in 2016. At Sun Yat-sen University, researchers from a variety of disciplines such as Public Management, Economics, Urban Planning, Sociology and Anthropology have conducted a number of studies on migration.

Before 2010, when Guangzhou hosted the Asian Games, most Public Management studies focused on foreigners' illegal entry, illegal residence and illegal work (termed the “three illegals” for short) and their negative impacts. Since 2009, LI Zhigang and his team have studied the socio-spatial features and the organizing principles of African ethnic enclaves from the perspective of residential segregation.¹ Urban Planning scholars have examined how African immigrants explore and make sense of places like the business area of Xiaobei or religious sites such as the Sacred Heart Cathedral. A number of sociological works examine the collective life of these groups through the lenses of social networks, social adaptation and mutual perceptions between non-African Guangzhou citizens and African immigrants. In his doctoral thesis, XU Tao conducted a qualitative analysis of African merchants' adjustments to changes that took place in 2010. LIANG Yucheng (2013²) examined the mechanisms of African migrants' transnational migration and collaborated with LIU Lin et al (2015³) to study their living conditions in local communities, both using the survey data.

While some social scientists have viewed the African community in Guangzhou as a more or less homogenous group, anthropologists ZHOU Daming and XU Duotian have in their recent work (2017⁴) emphasized ethnic heterogeneity and explored certain groups such as shopping-guide brokers. African Muslims in Guangzhou were one of the main topics of MA Qiang's doctoral thesis (2005), in which he proposed the concept of a “mobile spiritual



Guangzhou. Reproduced under a CC license, courtesy of Xiquinhosilva on Flickr.

community” (*liudong de jingshen shequ*) based on Islamic belief. NIU Dong (2015) focused on Africans' household, neighborhood and associations, and raised a new analytic framework of “the transient (*guoke*)” that highlights transnational mobility and minimal integration among these sojourners. Among the various research methods applied in the studies of African migrants, sociologists have mainly used large-scale social survey data, and anthropologists have begun to conduct in-depth fieldwork through which abundant qualitative information can be collected. Indeed, the qualitative approach seems to have gained popularity recently, as geographers and urban planning researchers, such as the team led by LI Zhigang, now use both questionnaires and interviews in their research.

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Notes

- 1 Zhigang Li, Desheng Xu, Feng Du, et al. 2009. “The Local Response of Transnational Social Space under Globalization in Urban China: A Case Study of African Enclave in Guangzhou”, *Geographical Research* 28(04):920-932
- 2 Yucheng Liang, 2013. “African Immigration in Guangzhou China: A Cumulative Causation Perspective on Immigration Behavior”, *Sociological Studies* 28(01): 134-159+243-244
- 3 Lin Liu, Yucheng Liang, Guangwen Song, et al. 2015. “Migration Patterns and Its Influencing Factors of African Immigrants in Guangdong Province”, *Chinese Journal of Population Science* (01):115-122+128
- 4 Daming Zhou & Duotian Xu. 2017. “Research on the Social Network of Guide Brokers in Guangzhou in the Perspective of Structural Hole”, *Ethno-National Studies* (03):41-49+123



Above: African Museum at ZNU. Right: Jinhua Qiubin Primary School; both photos courtesy of IASZNU.

An African perspective on African Studies in China

Kwesi D.L.S. Prah

African Studies' in China is a relatively recent scholastic initiative and tradition.¹ This is not to say that general knowledge on, or interest in Africa is new in China. Nevertheless, the recent pursuit to build and grow expertise in 'African Studies' has become a source of interest and focus of the Chinese academic community and government over the past 60 years. However, the challenges Chinese scholars face with regard to the tradition and relevance of 'African Studies' mirror those faced by Western scholars.

Despite the major strides being made in adding to the repositories of knowledge at various higher learning institutions across China, and the growing number of scholars interested in engaging in scholarship on Africa and about Africans, there is a continued 'othering' of Africans, their ideas, realities and scholastic traditions. Maurice Duverger, Edward Said, and Archie Mafeje all argued that researchers engaged in the social sciences are bound by particular value systems which are then reflected in the way they conceptualize and frame their research, hypothesize, or collate information.² This is no different in China, where most Chinese scholars studying Africa, African peoples and their thoughts or realities are primarily informed by Euro-American scholarly traditions. Furthermore, some of them are funded by, and follow, policy directives from government. The totality of these experiences means that a lot of time is spent regurgitating, reformulating, or replicating often biased, racist, and outmoded epistemological and empirical research frameworks.

Scholars such as Tandeka Nkiwane and Paulin Hountondji make it very clear that social sciences such as Ethnology or International Relations need to strip off the Eurocentric epistemic lens upon which they heavily rely.³ This is exemplified in research on Africa-China relations, through an over-reliance on 'experts' who are divorced from the political, social or economic realities of Africa, but who then claim to speak on behalf of all Africans. It is also crucially important that Chinese scholars preserve a sense of academic freedom, in order to provide more incisive critique, research and debate on the political economy of Africans around the world.

Most importantly, although Mafeje was optimistic that 'African Studies' would open paths for the veracity and value of Africanity and African scholarship, there are still indications that efforts to develop this field of study within Chinese academic discourse serves particular interests. As an African scholar in China, I can only hope that these interests are mindful of the subjective bias, epistemological flaws, and often racist nature of 'African Studies' and its traditions worldwide. This mindfulness would create a healthy culture of self-reflexivity and critique within Chinese academic discourse, which would complement scholarship by Africans, African and Africanist ideas, histories, and realities.

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Notes

- 1 I put African studies in inverted comas because although it is commonly used to demarcate an area of scholarship, it is also subject to intense criticism from African scholars regarding its scholastic traditions and epistemologies.
- 2 Duverger, M. 1968. *Sociologie Politique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, pp.11-12; Mafeje, A. 2008. 'Africanity: A Combative Ontology', *CODESRIA Bulletin* 384:59-115;109-110; Said, E.W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, pp.2-4.
- 3 See footnote in Hountondji, P. 2009. 'Knowledge of Africa, Knowledge by Africans: Two Perspectives on African Studies', *RCCS Annual Review* 1, National University of Benin, African Centre for Advanced Studies, p.4; also see, Nkiwane, T.C. 2001. 'Africa and International Relations: Regional Lessons for a Global Discourse', *International Political Science Review* 22(3):279-290; Zondi, S. 2015. 'Decolonial Humanism and Africa's Presence in International Diplomacy', *CODESRIA Bulletin*.

Bridging the gap: blackness and Sino-African relations

Keisha A. Brown

A 2016 television commercial for a Chinese laundry detergent featured an African man who, after being placed in a washing machine, emerged with white skin.

In 2017, the Hubei Provincial Museum exhibit entitled 'This Is Africa' displayed a series of diptychs, each one containing a photo of an African person juxtaposed with the face of an animal, such as a monkey, giraffe, or lion.

A skit in the nationally broadcasted 2018 CCTV Chinese New Year celebration program centered around the theme of Sino-African relations. Although it was meant to promote and praise ongoing economic and political developments, the execution of the theme was especially problematic in terms of its depiction of Africans. An African woman was performed by a Chinese actress in blackface with exaggerated physical features. This portrayal of African women was accented by African men costumed as animals, including monkeys and zebras.

In each of the above examples, African identities were replaced by whiteness, Chinese caricatures, or animals resulting in the misrepresentation of Africans, the erasure of racial identity, and the denial of humanity. Furthermore, these images were presented in Chinese spaces where they would be consumed by a vast audience of Chinese citizens, resulting in the widespread dissemination of problematic portrayals of Africans imbedded with racist connotations and stereotypes. Surprisingly, these incidents are occurring against the backdrop of increased Sino-African relations and the continual growth of African Studies in China. In the last decade, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and other related bureaus of the Chinese government supported the creation of numerous academic spaces in China devoted to African Studies. Just at the moment when there has been a steady increase in new scholarship by Chinese Africanists demonstrating the vitality and potential of African Studies, trade between China and various African nations has also increased, thus leading to more contact between these peoples. Considering these developments, how have such stereotypes and misunderstandings persisted? What role can an understanding of Black identity play in shifting these discourses?

To fully address the complexities and nuances of Sino-African relations, centering identity, specifically around the concept of Blackness, would enrich African Studies research by Chinese scholars. Blackness is not just a racial categorization based on skin color, but also encompasses history, culture, society, and politics as it relates to the struggles of peoples of the African diaspora. The performance of race as identity is a constant negotiation of disavowal, affiliation, and exclusion. Treating race as performative allows one to differentiate between audience and performer to discuss the racial frameworks in China shaping perceptions and representations of Blackness, as well as how said frameworks and beliefs are upheld or challenged. Chinese Africanists' critical engagement with the performativity of Blackness could reshape discourses in two crucial ways. First, critical engagement with the ways in which Blackness has been depicted and commodified by non-Blacks, especially in colonial or oppressive spaces, would lead to a recognition of how racializing the 'other' has historically shaped representations or conceptualizations of Blackness. Second, examining the ways Africans choose to express their own Black identities can both counteract and widen the narrow historically constructed representations by inserting the multiplicities of African identity into scholarly conversations. In concurrence with other existing and newly emerging scholarship, work that engages Blackness as an analytical frame would draw attention to the national and transnational aspects of Sino-African relations and has the potential to connect political and economic trends to social and cultural contexts to reflect the unique ways these components intertwine and continue to take shape.

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African Studies with Chinese characteristics? A perspective and a vision

XU Liang

African Studies in the United States gained momentum after the passing of the National Defense Education Act in 1958 (Title VI), followed by a substantial expansion of federal funding for area studies. Two years later, as the world celebrated 'the Year of Africa', the appointment of a Joint Committee on African Studies by the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies officially marked the coming of age of Africa as an area field in the US academy. This postwar burgeoning of area studies was in part prompted by the Cold War competition between the superpowers.

African Studies in China is still in its infancy. While African Studies programs in China can be traced back to the early 1960s when the Institute of West-Asian and African Studies and the Institute of Asian and African Studies were established at the Chinese Academy

of Social Sciences and Peking University, respectively, research outputs and government support were modest until the end of the previous century. The rapid proliferation of African Studies programs over the last decade or so coincided with the rise of China on the global stage and, in particular, its increasing presence and influence in Africa since the beginning of the new millennium.

With the recently launched Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese government support to area studies centers will only continue to expand. However, the numerical growth of programs and centers does not necessarily bring about a genuine flourishing of scholarship. Often, it masks and belies a false blossoming of research. As the old Chinese idiom goes, "it takes ten years to grow a tree, but a hundred to nurture the people." A good educational program takes time to develop and mature.

Looking forward, I am confident that the prospects of African Studies in China are bright. However, it should not become a replica of Euro-American African Studies. While much remains for Chinese Africanists to learn from their foreign colleagues, they could contribute more to the field if they approach Africa from a different standpoint and fully leverage the history and experience of the Chinese society. For example, urbanization in Africa bears similarities with Chinese urbanization in multiple dimensions. Job creation and the shortage of affordable housing are shared challenges facing numerous cities both in Africa and in China. There is a pronounced tendency amongst Chinese Africanists to believe that the experience of China's development over the last four decades offers a model for Africa as the continent aspires to develop and prosper.

In my view, issues such as post-conflict reconstruction, long-term rule of governing parties, religious and ethnic policies, the decline of marriage and family, and rapid industrialization provide an essential common ground for China and African countries to learn from each other. Although exploring these subjects in Africa does not produce an immediate solution to similar problems in China (or vice versa), it does help Chinese scholars and practitioners better appreciate and acknowledge such issues from a global and transnational perspective.

While it is legitimate for Chinese scholars and government officials to promote various merits of the China Model, it is equally critical for us to realize the invaluable experience that African countries offer to China. As a Chinese Africanist, I often say to myself as well as to my students: In many ways, Africa is a mirror, which forces us to stare at ourselves, bring the entire world into view, and build a shared moral conscience for all of humankind.

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The Peking University Centre for African Studies was founded in 1998 as a university-wide, interdisciplinary institution for comprehensive African research. It consists of faculty and research fellows from different departments and institutes, who specialize in African politics, economy, and cultures. Currently, the Center is collaborating with the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences to develop an African Studies certificate, the first of its kind in Chinese universities. This new curriculum program will enhance the education and research of Africa among Chinese university students. The Center's two flagship publications are the *PKU African Tele-Info* (a weekly newsletter) and the *Annual Review of African Studies in China*.