The Newsletter

Building the New Silk Road

The Focus

A collective and interdisciplinary analysis of social progress

Building material knowledge through conservation in Indonesia

Celebrating 25 years of the 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.

The beginning of the twenty-first century saw an explosion in popular and academic publications on connections and reconstructions 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 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.

Cheryl M. Schmitz (施美瑜), Global Perspectives on Society Teaching Fellow, New York University Shanghai, cheryl.schmitz@nyu.edu

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**Amidst a China-Africa cultural boom**

Ehizuelen Michael Mitchell Omoniyi

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 forget 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 Jinhua 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 involved in these cultural efforts, trying to show to the African people how the Chinese people respect and appreciate their arts and culture. As a result, 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.

Ehizuelen Michael Mitchell Omoniyi, Executive Director of the Centre of Nigerian Studies, Institute of African Studies, Zhejiang Normal University, mmacoro@yahoo.com

**Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai**

The Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai serves as the hub of 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 various parts of Asia through research and teaching. Collaborating with institutions across the world, the Center aims to play a bridging role between existing Asian studies knowledge sites. 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.
A Chinese migrant in Tanzania: Jackey Zhou

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. 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.

Notes
African Studies in China is relatively recent. 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 facing such initiatives and the evolution of the tradition and relevance of ‘African Studies’ mirror those faced by Western scholars.

Most importantly, although Mafisi was optimistic that African Studies would open paths for the variegation and value of African and Africanist 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 biases, epistemological flaws, and often racist nature of ‘African Studies’ and its traditions. This worldview would create a healthy culture of self-reflexivity and critique within Chinese academic discourse, which would complement scholarship by African, African and Africanist ideas, histories, and realities.

African Studies with Chinese characteristics? A perspective and a vision

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 ways. Job creation and the shortage of affordable housing are shared challenges facing numerous cities both in Africa and China. There is a pronounced tendency among Chinese Africanists to believe that the experiences of China’s development over the last four decades offers a model for Africa as the continent aspires to develop and modernize.

In view, issues such as post-conflict reconstruction, long-term rule of governing parties, and ethnic and religious divides, and 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 recognize and publicly express that African countries offer to China. As a Chinese Africanist, I often say to myself as well as 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.

Notes
1. I put African studies in inverted commas because although it has always been recommended to demonstrate an area of scholarship, it is also subject to intense criticism from African scholars regarding its scholastic traditions and epistemologies.

While African Studies programs in China can be traced back to the early 1950s 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 at the beginning of the new millennium.

With the recently launched Belt and Road Initiative, China’s foreign policy initiatives and research of Africa among Chinese universities. This new curriculum featuring China’s participation in the Sino-African relations and has the potential to connect political and economic trends to social and cultural contexts to reflect the understanding of these components interwoven and continue to take shape.