New Silk Road Narratives

LOCAL PERSPECTIVES ON CHINESE PRESENCE ALONG THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

EDITED BY JAMILA ADELI & LINDA AMMANN

HASP
HEIDELBERG ASIAN STUDIES PUBLISHING

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Jamila Adeli and Linda Ammann

Preface
Narratives, Dreams, and Perspectives in Area Studies

The time of writing this preface is marked by a couple of violent conflicts that have impacted contemporary international relations to a significant extent. The aggressive war by Russia against Ukraine, along with equally brutal conflicts elsewhere on the globe, are occupying huge parts of the daily media coverage in and beyond Europe. Against this backdrop, the People's Republic of China (PRC), the country forming the center of attention in this book, is a remarkably quiet political actor—given the role it plays both regionally and globally. China is expanding its economic and political strength and influence, soft-footed and peaceful, it seems. The PRC's comprehensive infrastructure project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is a flagship of the country's massive move into numerous regions and localities of Asia, Africa, and Europe. While the BRI causes suspicion among observers, particularly from outside China, the actual harm that the infrastructure project is doing has yet to be substantiated empirically—in economic and political regards alike. It is the perspective one takes that leads to positive or negative critique. What is barely shallow water to the camel is an ocean to the mouse, as an ancient Sufi adage says. Similarly, what is a considered a fierce competitor project by some is a welcome investment project for others. Challenging the BRI with the project of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) is one reaction; accommodating Chinese investment for the sake of lifting up the local economy is another. Japan proactively promotes FIOP, whereas Pakistan embraces the promises of a China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) for a brighter future.

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The above topics relate to what is conventionally studied, analyzed, and discussed with regard to the BRI, i.e., the project's economic and political impacts and repercussions. The economy- and politics-related publications on the BRI are multitudinous and probably uncountable when we include studies in the different languages of the world that do not automatically enter the dominant online data banks and search engines. The present book publication departs from such works in a refreshing manner. It directs its gaze at the cultural dimension of the BRI project, looking through the lens of the narratives that come along with it and drawing the bigger picture of a geocultural landscape that is created by China's cultural policies, both domestically and internationally. Two anchor notions form the rallying points for the editors, namely, the imagery of the New Silk Road and the projection of the Chinese Dream. The relevance of culture in studying the BRI forms the center stage and the vantage point for analyzing the BRI "as a new geocultural and transcultural developer," as the editors reveal. Yet the perspective is always a local one, i.e., the scale is narrowed down and zooms into individual accounts of people who are affected in one way or another by the meaning-making of Silk Road and Dream narratives. Literary manifestations of reflecting on China in Africa, the role of language as a means of cultural policy, or the impact of Confucius Institutes in conveying and shaping cultural heritage shed light on the *cultural* infrastructure that is built up in the framework of the BRI. Some views are Sinocentric in their interpretative approach, while others share a bottom-up perspective on, for instance, the implementation of the Chinese Dream in Tanzania. The overarching bracket spans the scope of what is designated as the emotional architecture of China–Africa relations. With this intentionally culture-based approach, the editors and authors provide a rare and valuable collection of case studies, informed opinions, experiential accounts, and dialogical reflections on and of the (meta-)narratives that embed the BRI.

The book is a result of three years of work in a German research consortium that strives to unfold local perspectives on transregional infrastructure projects. Abbreviated with the acronym De:link // Re:link, the scholars in this consortium intend to bring *local insights and new knowledges* ("l-i-n-k") to the surface. The local is the lens that is looked through; it is a perspective rather than a designation of a particular geographical scale. This comprehension of the local is one feature of the consortium's take on "doing Area Studies." Living up to the task of epistemic decolonization and theorizing "from the South" are prime concerns that have translated into the contents of this edited volume. Thanks to the funding of their research initiative by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), scholars in the consortium can contribute to making local views on the BRI from Asia, Africa, and Europe known to a wider public. The readers of this volume are a welcome part of this wider public and will

hopefully enjoy browsing through its chapters. In my capacity as the speaker of the De:link // Re:link consortium, my special thanks go to Jamila Adeli and Linda Amman for their relentless efforts in putting this book together and editing it with great commitment and care.

Claudia Derichs, Berlin, April 2024

Introduction

New Silk Road Narratives[1]

Jamila Adeli and Linda Ammann

In 2013, during a visit to Kazakhstan, China's president Xi Jinping announced a project that is designed to intensify the globalization of the 21st century and reshape the world order: the construction of transcontinental and transregional infrastructure that facilitates trade between China, Asia, Africa, and Europe. Now officially titled the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the initiative focuses on cooperation and connectivity in order to provide infrastructural ties and investment to neighboring and strategically relevant countries (cf. Chang 2019). In 2021, its most important projects (for China) included majority shares in maritime infrastructures in Zeebrugge, Piraeus, and Dubai as well as other projects in Duisburg, Nairobi, and Hambantota, to name but a few. The BRI aims to embed China in economically promising neighboring countries by facilitating economic corridors across the three continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Although it began in 2013 as a rather vague, unilateral idea from President Xi Jinping, who wasn't known for facilitating global cooperation, the announcement of the BRI has since raised eyebrows. Over the past years, the initiative has developed into a politicized and contested meta-project[2] that has gained worldwide

1 We would like to thank our peer reviewers Ágota Révész and Andreas Eckert for their inspiring and most helpful comments, criticism, and thoughts.

2 Literature on the BRI is vast. Studies characterize the initiative from three major perspectives (Clarke 2018): the BRI is firstly considered as a reaction to a perceived US encirclement and to constrain the rise of India (cf. p. 8); secondly, it is considered as domestic

Jamila Adeli and Linda Ammann, Introduction: New Silk Road Narratives. In: Jamila Adeli and Linda Ammann (eds.), New Silk Road Narratives: Local Perspectives on Chinese Presence along the Belt and Road Initiative. Heidelberg: Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing, 2024, pp. 1–34. https://doi.org/10.11588/hasp.1370.c19718

attention, with scholars, politicians, business people and interested citizens eagerly trying to understand what the Chinese government is aiming to accomplish and how its plan is affecting not only the neighboring, participating countries but, ultimately, the present world order. Until now, the building and funding of the BRI infrastructure has been understood as an architecture that—at least for some countries—entails the possibility of providing economic benefits. What has become clear, however, is that "the initiative is more about ensuring domestic political stability and economic growth as well as China's position as a major player in international affairs" (Chang 2019: 11).

The Chinese wording for the BRI is 一带一路 *(yī dài yī lù)*, which translates as "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR). To circumvent the impression of an all too strategic project, Xi Jinping had the English name modified to the current "Belt and Road Initiative" which smoothens the earlier term "strategy" and has a more inclusive and approachable tone (cf. Bērziņa-Čerenkova 2017).[3]

In one of Xi's political speeches, he introduced his project as the "New Silk Road," thereby evoking the Ancient Silk Road as "our best teacher"[4] and, hence, historical guarantor to facilitate international trade and cooperation. The expression "New Silk Road" or even "New Chinese Silk Road"[5] is frequently used to capture the nature of the BRI. It reveals the political efforts to connect the present China-led projects to a period of early globalization that facilitated the economic,

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strategy to stabilize economic growth in China (cf. p. 8); and thirdly, it is considered as an attempt (with the use of soft power) to gain geopolitical and geocultural power, not only in the region but as a global hegemon that overshadows the US (Fukuyama 2016 in Clarke 2018: 18).

3 Bērziņa-Čerenkova of the Latvian Institute of International Affairs comments in a newspaper article on the renaming of One Belt One Road as the Belt and Road Initiative as follows: "As explained by the Chinese side, the first English translation, namely, 'One Belt One Road', has brought about numerous misinterpretations, as the partners tend to focus too much on the word "one", assuming that there is to be only one maritime route and a single land belt, whereas, in reality, 'The Belt and Road Initiative aims to connect Asia, Europe and Africa along five routes.' Supposedly, the perception of a single road as a limited offer can drive the regional partners into competition mode. Therefore, the stressing of the numeral 'one' is to be avoided. Also, the word 'initiative' has been admitted into the official acronym in order to stress the openness of the strategy, and to avoid criticisms over 'China-centered institution building,' that have been gaining momentum as the project progresses." https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/08/01/beijing-to-the-world-please-stop-saying-obor/?sh=5a697a6017d4 (accessed 10 Oct. 2023).

4 http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm (accessed 8 Oct. 2023).

5 We refrain from attributing the ethnic label "Chinese" to the Silk Road or BRI and prefer to use the expression "China-led" Silk Road (Amineh 2023) or BRI.

political, and social encounter of East and West: Due to successful, transregional trade and cooperation by land and sea, China, Europe, and Africa share a common past and memories of this period. The notion of the Ancient Silk Road not only draws on historic trade connections but emphasizes cultural connectivity and transculturalization as one of its most significant legacies. It is commonly referred to as a symbol of harmonious cultural cooperation and a catalyst of interconnectedness. Whereas cross-cultural interactions have been studied intensely in the context of the Ancient Silk Road (Liu 2010; Hansen 2012; Mishra 2020), the relevance of culture in analyzing the BRI as a "New China-led Silk Road" still seems understudied and neglected due to the prominence of investigating financial, economic, political, and social advantages and disadvantages related to BRI projects.

The scarcity of literature with a cultural focus is surprising, since not only is culture considered and proven to have a great impact and influence on trade, economic growth, and politics (Eberle et al. 2018), but Xi Jinping himself increasingly highlights the relevance of culture, cultural connectivity, and transcultural communication:

> We will strengthen people-to-people and cultural exchanges with other countries, giving prominence to Chinese culture while also drawing on other cultures… [and we will improve] the capacity for engaging in international communication so as to tell China's stories well; present a true, multidimensional, and panoramic view of China; and enhance our country's cultural soft power. (Xi Jinping, 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 2017)[6]

Against this reading, the aim of this book is to engage with culture and, more precisely, with cultural practices as a means to understand and analyze the BRI as a new geocultural and transcultural developer. What becomes visible when we look at the BRI, its actors, and its policies through the lens of culture and cultural practices? Which patterns of (dis)connectivities emerge when analyzing cultural practices as a form of BRI-related (re)actions? In sharpening the lens of culture, the book provides initial insights into local perspectives on BRI-related projects and politics after its ten-year jubilee. It not only emphasizes cultural embeddedness and dependency when implementing globalizing and transregionalizing political and economic BRI projects but also reveals the emerging power of culture and cultural practices in strategically and organically forming a new geopolitical and geocultural region.

6 https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm (accessed 10 Oct. 2023).

While local (re)actions on the BRI can be analyzed with respect to various subject and geographic areas, for this publication, we decided to focus on cultural practices and BRI-related (re)actions happening in the scope of Africa–China relations. As we will show, local (re)actions are particularly well suited to being explored at the level of culture and cultural practices. The geographic focus on China's relation to Africa is based on the one hand on the intensity of China's engagement on the African continent which evokes a multitude of (re)actions of diverse agents and on the other hand on the expertise of the contributing authors. This is reflected in the individual chapters dealing with African perspectives and (re)actions, China-centered or China-internal perspectives on the BRI, as well as contributions dealing directly with cultural–political negotiation processes between China and Africa and Chinese presence[7] on the African continent.

China and Africa have a long history of contact such as the exchange of goods via Chinese emperors and sailors "visiting" the African continent. Archeological findings date back to at least the Tang dynasty (618–907) (cf. e.g. Anshan 2022: 3), and there are indications that suggest there was (at least indirect) contact between China and Africa via exchange of goods in the times of Cleopatra's reign, 51–30 BC (cf. e.g. Jinyuan 1984: 242). Certainly at least worth mentioning is seafarer Zheng He (1371–1433 or 1435), who landed on the African continent no fewer than three times between 1412 and 1433 (Federl 2018: 59).

The basis for modern Africa–China relations (especially regarding economic and political contact) was laid in the 1950s, when China signed the first bilateral trade agreements and established first direct diplomatic relations (cf. Obuah 2012: 75). In the 1960s, Chinese government officials around Premier Zhou Enlai visited ten African states and established a total of 13 principles for their relation with African states, announcing "that relations would be governed by 'equality, mutual interest and non-interference'" (Hanauer and Morris 2014: 19). These principles still define the basis of the present-day relations of China and Africa as being "friendly relationships" without "political conditions or interference in the internal affairs of African countries" (Hanauer and Morris 2014: 19).

The large-scale engagement of China on the African continent, however, only started in the late 1990s when China opened up its markets, spurring rapid

7 We follow authors such as Bodomo (in this volume), Esteban (2010), and many more in using the term "Chinese presence" for China's engagement, for example, on the African continent. The concept is not only more accurate but also more accessible even to local populations experiencing it. The term "Chinese presence" both includes engagement led by the Chinese state and covers physical, emotional, digital, etc. presence of the Chinese state, people of Chinese nationality or descent, as well as Chinese goods, culture etc.

economic growth. This engagement culminated in the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).[8]

As China started to reach out to African states in the 1950s and 1960s in order to form economic and political relations, it also felt the need to establish cultural relations with the African continent. Its external cultural policy and diplomacy was based on socialist values advocated by Mao Zedong, and cultural relations were first established with socialist countries (cf. Liu 2008). It was in the course of this, that China sent out cultural and arts delegations to African (but also Asian and Latin American) states in order to facilitate the establishment of cultural relations (aiming at an extension to trade and diplomatic relations), (cf. Liu 2008).[9] Premier Zhou's China started to extend these cultural relations to non-socialist countries, advocating a "civil diplomacy (or people's diplomacy), aiming to increase civil economic relations and cultural exchanges with those countries that had not yet established diplomatic ties" (Liu 2008: 15).

As Lui (2008: 16) explains, "equating cultural relations with civil (people-to-people) relations was obviously the logical extension of Mao Zedong's domestic culture policy: Culture serves socialism, and culture serves people. The Chinese government's foreign cultural policy was therefore intertwined with China's domestic cultural policy, and the underlying assumptions to justify the two were the same, particularly those on the functions of culture and the role government was supposed to assume. To choose cultural diplomacy as the preferential course was a have-to choice for the Chinese leaders in combating China's international isolation in 1950s".

The Chinese Dream was announced as a political slogan by Xi Jinping in 2012 and has since then developed into a narrative that conveys the government's vision for China's future. As such, it is strategically communicated as a long-term perspective on a strong identity and prosperous future for the Chinese people (for detailed discussion concerning the Chinese Dream, see Section 3 of this introduction). Similar to the Chinese Dream, we consider the BRI as clearly China-led and as a strategic, top-down narrative that plays a significant role in the country's fulfilment of the Chinese Dream (cf. Chang 2019: 11), since both the

8 For a detailed description of the history of Africa–China relations, see Hanauer and Morris (2014) and Oqubay and Lin (2019), who provide a concise description and analysis of the implications of China's economic rise for the African continent and its economic transformation.

9 Between 1952 and 1958, China sent out 1,700 cultural and arts delegations that involved more than 17,400 people. Cultural delegations accounted for 70 % of all delegations sent out by the Chinese government during this period (Lui 2008: 15, referring to Ge 2000: 32).

narratives of the Chinese Dream and the China-led BRI follow a clear Sinocentric agenda. Once they hit local ground, however, they seem to transform into localized narratives: As they enter specific regions and their contexts, they are embedded into the actual realities on the ground and develop into large "projection screens" for those actors whose lives are deeply affected by the operationalization of BRI projects. Thus, we tackle the BRI as a decentralized network of physical, social, political, and cultural infrastructures—similar to what we outlined above in terms of a decentralized Ancient Silk Road infrastructure—entailing in-between spaces to renegotiate cultural, political, and economic positioning. We see a great benefit in concentrating on the localization of BRI narratives within and outside China and engage with the (re)actions of actors whose realities are changing due to their governments' cooperation with the Chinese government.

The contributors of this book unpack and analyze these sets of local and regional emotions, views, ideas, risks, and opportunities connected to the BRI and the Chinese Dream. Through the analysis of poems, novels, fine art, or the cultural politics of cultural promotion organizations in relation to Chinese Dream or New Silk Road narratives, it is the intangible (that is, emotional) infrastructures of the BRI that come into sight. Here, in engaging with cultural practices, we observe the production of space, of *voids*, between the (dis)connecting elements of a new Silk Road. They allow for the projection of local, national, and regional dreams and positionings that may or may not connect to other dreams and positionings but that may help to recreate identities in a newly emerging geocultural and geopolitical region that spans China, Europe, Asia, and Africa.

In order to provide a thematic and conceptual framework for this multidisciplinary publication, we firstly outline the concept of the narrative and how we use the narrative to tackle local and regional responses as a form of cultural connectivity in the context of the BRI. Secondly, we introduce our view on historic and contemporary Silk Road narratives to indicate how narratives can be regarded as geocultural developers. Thirdly, we describe our understanding of the Chinese Dream[10] as a specification of a narrative that we consider to have a significant role in the emotional architecture of the BRI. We end this section by introducing the individual sections and chapters of this book.

10 In English-language academic literature, two terms, "China Dream" (cf. Callahan 2014, 2017) and "Chinese Dream" (cf. Loh 2019, Li 2022), are used to refer to the same concept. Since in Chinese there is no difference between the two terms (both are 中国梦), it seems to be subject to the personal preference of each author which term to use. In the chapters of this book, it is thus also the personal choice of the respective authors. In this introduction, we use "Chinese Dream."

1 Narratives as the Stabilizer and Glue of Cultures: The China-led Silk Road

Cultural practices[11]—as understood in this context—refer to the production, dissemination, and reception of culture-related actions as well as to the context in which cultural artifacts and manifestations take place, be they performances, museum exhibitions, book publications, language teachings, studies, theater / film productions, sports, etc. In the context of this book, we engage with cultural practices on two levels: First, they can be regarded as strategy or agency[12] to raise acceptance for BRI-projects and to implement them into local contexts. Second, cultural practices can further be regarded as both regional and local reactions to BRI-related practices. Using the lens of cultural practices, we rethink the BRI as cultural infrastructure and suggest focusing on narratives as a broad and multimodal format of cultural practices that arise as translocal and transregional (re)actions to the BRI.

The anthropological concept of narrative is a fruitful analytical tool to categorize a significant element of cultural practices as defined above: As narratives are highly effective meaning-makers of realities (for more details, see 1.1), they are a crucial form of cultural practices as both an action and a reaction. As Casas-Klett and Li (2022: 858) explain, narratives "derive their power from the ability to engage the human mind and heart and therefore affect behavior and decision-making." They discuss the concept of narrative in relation to the BRI as "driver of institutional change in favor of globalization" (2022: 857) from an economic perspective, traceable to the narrative's explanatory power (Casas-Klett and Li 2022 after Shiller 2017: 968). The explanatory power of narratives, their meaning-making ability, and their emotional effects on humans are decisive mechanisms that both connect and disconnect the actors and projects along the BRI, thereby forming an emotional infrastructure running in parallel to the physical manifestation of the project.

Narrowing our analysis of the BRI to the emotional and transcultural infrastructure, we consider narratives as drivers of transformation and as transregional

11 We see "culture" in line with the definition of UNESCO as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, that encompasses, not only art and literature, but lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs" (UNESCO 2001: 3). For a detailed overview of definitions of culture, see Jahoda (2012).

12 Agency refers to the capacity, the condition, or the state of affairs that enables an actor to act and prevail.

developers. We are specifically interested in how localized and regionalized narratives emerge and how they are (dis)connected from/with the BRI. Hence, by looking at narratives about the BRI, we are further able to pinpoint and reveal ruptures and voids in the cultural infrastructure of emerging, BRI-related local and regional realities as well as in the narrative infrastructure itself.

When engaging with the BRI's infrastructure, we not only come across railways, highways, and ports, we also encounter patterns of thought and practices that engage with the BRI as reality-forming infrastructure. Narratives, as a form of strategic meaning-making, belong to such patterns of thought and practices and are significant in either connecting or disconnecting projects, people, and cultures. In the following, we will introduce our understanding of narratives as cultural practice in relation to the BRI.

1.1 The BRI as China-led Metanarrative on Connectivity

The BRI as a strategy and its impact on practices of connectivity has been neglected so far (Loh 2019: 171). In order to grasp local (re)actions related to the BRI, we focus on narratives that exist and arise in the context of the BRI, as they embody both "world making" and "communicating worlds." Narratives transmit at rapid speed from one context and region to another, heralding a possible future for a specific location or region, or an upcoming new transregional relationship. As narratives not only contain content but carry values, perceptions, emotions, and cultural practices, we consider it an apt concept and method to study the dimension of culture within the context of the BRI in order to describe and analyze local responses to a large transregional infrastructure project.

We suggest working with the concept of narratives from an anthropological perspective, regarding narratives as both research topic and method (Loseke 2022). The term "narrative" is increasingly used in all kinds of fields, genres, and circumstances. As early as 2007, Ryan (2007: 22) observed that "in the past fifteen years, as the 'narrative turn in the humanities' gave way to the narrative turn everywhere (politics, science studies, law, medicine, and last, but not least, cognitive science), few words have enjoyed so much use and suffered so much abuse as narrative and its partial synonym, story." With the rise of anthropology and the need to include oral history and narrations, the literary concept of narrative was rethought and extended. Ryan (2017: 517) describes this process as follows: "The ubiquity and multiple manifestations of stories in human societies mean that the relevance of the theoretical concept of narrative extends to all the disciplines concerned with human experience, including cultural studies." In cultural studies, the narrative thus also includes "oral narratives spontaneously told in conversation,

or produced in response to questions by an interviewer." Such narratives are also referred to as "natural narratives" (Ryan 2017: 522). In the course of the narrative turn (Goodsoon and Gill 2011: 18), the concept of narrative as a transdisciplinary method for investigating and (de)constructing realities has achieved a broad form of application and popularity.

Narratives are a tool to attribute meaning to a series of events, to be assertive and persuasive on present and future action, and to shape practices. Narratives construct and navigate realities and are, therefore, constitutive of practices (Loh 2021: 175). Narratives and practices form a reciprocal relationship. As Loh points out, practices rely on the interpretative context of narratives, as narratives connotate practices with "meaning *ad actum* and *post factum*" (2021: 175). Therefore, narratives have the power to (re)configure practices and vice versa (see Loh 2021: 177). Narratives are a powerful tool to both facilitating and impeding political, social, and cultural agency, as they "function as the social bond, or 'glue', that gives practices stability over time and space" (Bueger and Gadinger 2018). This also results in the ability to destabilize such practices (Loh 2021).

Here, the aspect of power becomes relevant. Narratives function as brokers for dominant ideologies and instruments of power (Peters 2017: 1303), as they not only structure information in order to make sense of it but also position and link real or imagined events, issues, objects, or matters in a strategic and coherent way. In this manner, they have the ability to make sense of new and old phenomena—to connect the past, present, and future. Narratives not only entail strategic action to "construct a shared meaning of the past, the present and the future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors," (Miskimmon et al. 2017: 6) they are also tools of strategic communication. Loh (2021:168) has categorized the functions of narratives: they "(i) serve as signposts for actors in clarifying what are relevant / irrelevant and appropriate / inappropriate practices; (ii) provide 'background' stock of information where actors draw to legitimize their practices; and (iii) create conditions for both the creation of new practices and contestation of existing ones."

Another feature of narratives is their cultural sensitivity. Narratives are created in a specific cultural context and addressed to a cultural audience. De Fina (2016: 329), for example, notes that, by analyzing narratives, we "try to establish how storytelling or stories shape and are shaped by practices and beliefs that are characteristic of communities sharing the same culture." Cultural contexts shape the construction of narratives; hence, when analyzing them, we need to account for "how story topics and story content are related to ideologies and cultural practices associated with a particular community" (De Fina 2016: 329).

Narratives are sense-making practices that not only legitimize various practices between various actors but also serve as culture-sensitive and context-sensitive

access to local reactions on translocal and global practices and strategies. Hence, tackling local reactions to the BRI from a top-down or bottom-up level seems most insightful from the perspective of communicating and addressing BRI-related narratives. In doing so, we expect to gain access to and understanding of otherwise hidden transcultural local knowledge production and practices. As a topic and method of research, narratives thus become increasingly relevant for the necessary and critical realignment of the discipline of area studies. When we analyze narratives and use them as a lens to access and investigate underlying topics and structures, they serve as an apt tool to highlight and strengthen local knowledge (local sources in local languages). When used as both research topic and method, they are able to contribute to creating local theory as a multicentric interaction, and thereby to the necessity of creating a multicentric epistemology (Rehbein 2020).

1.2 People-to-people Connectivity as Geocultural Developer

In Chinese media, aims and benefits of the BRI are often delivered orally in political speeches or in mediatized PR campaigns. Official documents that define the BRI are rare. The first edition of these official documents was issued March 28, 2015 by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of the PRC, with State Council authorization, and was titled "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road." From China's perspective, the BRI represents a new approach to foreign policy, driven by the idea of "opening up China"[13] to the world. The Communist Party communicates the BRI as a facilitator serving state and non-state actors in the negotiation of economics, politics, finances, etc. on an unprecedented scale.

The BRI contains five official pillars or major goals: policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people connectivity.[14] The BRI strategy predominantly focuses on countries in Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Africa, and Eastern Europe. With its maritime roads, the BRI "will be a major opportunity for consumer and industrial firms as it accounts for 63 % of the global population and 44 % of its GDP, excluding China" (Baker

13 The "opening up of China" refers to the economic reforms conducted under Deng Xiaoping in 1978. By engaging with international markets, the Chinese economy experienced accelerated economic growth during the 1980s and 1990s.

14 See, for example, https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/1084.html (accessed 10 Oct. 2023).

McKenzie 2017: 2). With its land roads, also known as belts, the BRI connects China and Europe as two of the world's largest economies, while excluding the USA.

In his speeches, President Xi Jinping highlights transregional and transnational collaboration as key practices to connect trade, economies, and culture on an unprecedented global scale (cf. Gallelli 2019). The roads and belts are both actual routes and metaphors that build an infrastructure of economics, finance, health, and culture in order to collaborate beyond nation states and to form a new region of common interests. According to official Chinese announcements, approximately two thirds of the world's population, or 149 countries (as of July 2022), are taking part in the BRI (Statista 2023).

Connectivity has emerged as a key term and essential practice in achieving common wealth and future progress. Connectivity refers to physical connections by building transregional infrastructures; to economic connections by establishing transnational trade projects; to financial connectivity by encouraging cross-border currency settlements; to digital connectivity by developing transregional digital infrastructure in telecommunication and information technology; and to geopolitical connectivity by expanding diplomatic ties globally.

In its official documents (or at least in its political statement on the BRI), the Chinese government introduces people-to-people connectivity to foster and expand cultural and educational exchange between China and BRI-related countries. Tourism, academic cooperation and mutual understanding between different cultures are being promoted in order to integrate China into a newly emerging geocultural region. People-to-people connectivity *(mínxīn xiāngtōng)* is thus considered as the bedrock of the BRI and, hence, serves as its main implementation asset. It is not only the official fifth pillar of the BRI, but the prerequisite and basis for interlinking projects, roads, regions, finances, ideas, etc. (Kidd 2022). Against this background, we argue that the relevance of people-to-people connectivity—which essentially comes down to culture and cultural practices—has been underestimated and rather neglected in research and needs to be furnished with more academic awareness and studies.[15]

What circulates and anchors along the BRI is not only goods, financial capital, or technologies but, first and foremost, people—it transports their realities, perceptions, and practices. From a praxeological perspective, people-to-people

15 The BMBF-funded research consortium De:link / /Re:link: Local Perspectives on Transregional (Dis)entanglements analyzes local and regional responses to large infrastructure projects like the BRI from a decidedly cultural perspective. It includes researchers at HU Berlin, ZOiS Berlin, BICC Bonn, and ZMO Berlin (funding period 1 April 2021 – 31 March 2024).

connectivity is the core and basis of all that weaves the BRI's projects into a large infrastructure of roads that, in turn, facilitates the circulation of finances, ideas, goods, and values. Tim Winter has been one of the first scholars to analyze the BRI through the lens of culture. In his book *Geocultural Power: China's Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty-First Century (2019)*, Winter describes how cultural politics are being amended and used as a strategy to elevate China's cultural positioning to the next level: In focusing on contemporary narratives of Ancient Silk Roads, the Chinese government uses heritage and history as powerful means to support the geopolitical and economic aims of the BRI (Winter 2019). He introduces the China-led BRI as a geocultural configuration that evokes and mobilizes cultural and historical narratives of the Silk Roads (Lin and Yang 2020). Mapping New Silk Road regions through the lens of cultural agency and practices, a new geocultural region comes into sight. Consequently, questions of who owns, protects, and negotiates cultural sites, spaces, and production have become more and more pressing, especially since national borders and national "survival and maintenance strategies" have been reinforced and reenacted due to the global COVID-19 crisis. One of the most prominent examples is provided by the field of cultural heritage, which is increasingly renegotiated through cultural diplomacy (Winter 2020).

Whereas Winter has focused on bilateral or multilateral top-down people-to-people practices in the field of cultural politics that embody the relationship between state actors, Kidd (2022), in her book "Culture Paves the Way," takes the example of contemporary art practices in southwest China to focus on bottom-up practices to understand and investigate the cultural dimension of China's BRI and its local responses. In the context of people-to-people connectivity, studies on the agency of non-state actors have been rare (Loh 2021, Kidd 2022). Nevertheless, they are essential in tackling people-to-people connectivity as transcultural practice, which unfolds only in dialogic cooperation, mutual understanding, and culturally respectful negotiation: It is language and the communication of ideas and perception that constitutes people-to-people connectivity. In introducing the Chinese term *mínxīn xiāngtōng*, Kidd lays emphasis on its literal translation to the flow of communication between peoples' hearts and minds:

"Put together, Minxin xiangtong signifies in much the same way as does Joseph Nye's soft power, as a mechanism by which to win hearts and minds, bringing the aspirations, thoughts and feelings of foreign peoples into alignment with one another" (Kidd 2022: 41).

The analogy with Nye's soft power is insightful, especially as it is attributed with an actor-centric, reciprocal relation: People-to-people connectivity is exerted between states and, thus, government actors as well as non-state actors (Kidd 2022: 44–48) in the fields of "cultural programming, including health and humanitarian

assistance, as well as academic, cultural and professional exchange, both domestic and international. This cultural programming can be either top-down or bottom-up. The former is both conceived and implemented by government actors. The latter consists in grassroots conceived cultural programming implemented through private-sector channels" (Kidd 2022: 44).

In this light, the fifth pillar of the BRI turns out to be a highly relevant asset of the infrastructure project. People-to-people connectivity is a transculturalizing, transregionalizing, and strategic practice—or, better, an agenda—that shapes a new geocultural region. Analyzing people-to-people connectivity within and between both state and non-state level actors provides new insights into the (de)construction of realities that are embedded in New Silk Road regions—regions which increasingly position themselves as important players within a geocultural and geopolitical arena in the process of formation. Here, the role of culture is to evoke a new notion and imagination of the BRI as an emotional architecture and new infrastructure of belongings in transregionalizing realities. Such emotional architectures frequently express and reflect themselves in narratives that accompany the BRI. (Local) languages and cultural spaces opening up or closing due to the act of (cultural) translation enable us to engage with and analyze both historic and present communication.

As we have claimed, people-to-people connectivity is the prerequisite and basis for transregional and transcultural practices. Communication is one such practice and emerges as a key tool in implementing the BRI in the specific local and regional contexts of the participating BRI partners. As connectivity starts with communication, we are posing the following questions: How do people communicate and connect as a reaction to BRI projects and Chinese presence? How do cultural practices construct and deconstruct narratives, and who are the agents? What is the role of cultural practice in relation to (de)constructing BRI-related narratives?

We tackle these questions from the perspective of practice and agency, as both are forms of human behavior that shape realities and exert power. In short, practice and agency are means of configuring lived and perceived contexts. Such an approach reveals the transformative potential of actor-centric practices, especially in asymmetrical power contexts.

The relationship of practices and structure is a reciprocal one: On the one hand, practices presuppose structures; on the other hand, practices produce and change structures (cf. Giddens 1979: 53). We follow Reckwitz in his theory of practice, where he describes practice as a "typified form of behaving" (Reckwitz 2010: 189), "which contains a specific knowledge" (Reckwitz 2006: 36–37), and argues that practices are "practical knowledge that makes bodies capable of acting, that makes them 'actors'" (Reckwitz 2004: 44).

Agency is the ability of the individual to influence structure. More precisely, it describes the ability of actors to implement their will to act within and shape their context (cf. Giddens 1979: 55). Hence, agency is the exercise of power to enable transformation (cf. Giddens 1979: 55), and therefore it constitutes or changes structures. Agency does not stop at national borders; instead, agency and, hence, the power to construct and transform structures, transgresses various demarcation lines and is wielded in different localities, regions, and cultures. Here lies the transculturalizing and transregionalizing potential of agency: It is the grounding and promise of people-to-people connectivity in the context of the BRI.

2 Historic and Contemporary Silk Road Narratives

Narratives on Silk Roads hold a dominant part in the communication of BRI projects to local publics. Two types of Silk Road narratives occur when we engage with the BRI as a narrative architecture: Silk Roads as (1) historical narratives, and (2) contemporary narratives. Looking at them from these approaches helps us to understand the strategic implementation of cultural content into the BRI communication that aims to generate acceptance and participation in the context of the BRI. Both approaches will be introduced in the following.

2.1 Romanticizing the Cultural Legacies of the Past

The historical narrative of the Silk Road is frequently used to refer to ancient trade routes that facilitated interaction between cultures, religions, economies, and politics of the Eurasian region between the second century BCE and the middle of the 15th century.[16] For more than 1,500 years, the Ancient Silk Road ran between the Mediterranean through Central Asia to East Asia, its main route being about 6,400 km long. Nowadays, the term "Silk Road" has advanced into a well-known trope for trade with silk, wool, and gold. It evokes the notion of early transregional mobility via land and sea and the notion of harmonious exchange of cultural practices and ideas through merchants and goods, its most prominent example being the expansion of Buddhism from India to China. As a popular and highly nostalgic figure of thought, the notion of Silk Roads stands for transcultural belonging, cultural connectivity and exchange, and an early

16 The term Silk Road was coined by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, a term that Deepak Nayyar reveals as an entirely "colonial construct" (Nayyar 2017).

global trade network. Hence, it does not come as a surprise that Xi Jinping frequently refers to notions of the Ancient Silk Road when communicating the BRI domestically and to other countries, as it seems like a familiar, connectable story to tell about the harmony of cultural encounters. Winter's latest research (2019), for example, highlights how the Chinese government engages heritage and history in its mission to develop the BRI's geopolitical and economical dimension: the Chinese government draws on suitable if rather simplified notions of the Ancient Silk Roads, like long-distance relations and linear and harmonious infrastructure, and implements them strategically in its intentionally vague discourse (Winter 2019: 190–191). Since Xi Jinping announced and introduced his vision of the BRI, the aforementioned imageries connected to the Ancient Silk Road have been reawakened, reinforced, and reimagined as a figure of thought in the broader national publics and in recent academic research (see Sarwar 2017, Frankopan 2021, Winter 2022).

Using the expression "Ancient Silk Roads," the romance of "common humanity, a form of universalism where difference can be celebrated without forgetting or exoticizing" (Thorsten 2005: 302) is both reawakened and firmly inscribed in transcultural histories. Since the proclamation of the BRI, various Chinese actors have used the Ancient Silk Road and its harmonious, interconnecting, and peaceful connotations as a communicative tool for its BRI PR. As a network, the Ancient Silk Road had no leading actor but was a decentralized and organically growing network of trading and mobility (Ahmad 2021) facilitating cultural exchange. This romantic notion of the Ancient Silk Road, however, disappears and turns porous from a non-Chinese view: The idea of transcultural harmony and belonging is being doubted. Instead, political, economic, and cultural overtaking and hegemony by the Chinese government is suspected from various sides.

2.2 A China-led Silk Road as the Dawn of a New World Order?

The contemporary narrative of the New Silk Road or the "Chinese" Silk Road, on the other hand, is not as positively connotated as the historical one, with its "nostalgic longing for the past as a model for the future" (Callahan 2017: 248). The BRI is considered to mainly serve Chinese interests. Hence, the reference to a so-called New Chinese Silk Road is not surprising. In this light, the BRI seems like a strategic, purpose-oriented, and centralized infrastructure across Eurasia and Africa under Chinese directorship. Furthermore, it can be regarded as operationalizing the Sinocentric vision of a China-led Silk Road as a tool to implement the ambitions of the Chinese government to "resurrect the great nation" and thus

regain global power in world politics and economics. Instead of reconstructing the romance around cross-cultural fertilization, the contemporary narrative of the New Chinese Silk Road has triggered suspicion, caution, and critique towards an assumed new Sinocentric world order in both mainstream media and academia (Moritz 2015, Mayer 2018, Hamilton and Ohlberg 2020, Silvius 2021).

The depiction of the BRI as the New Chinese Silk Road prompted mixed political, social, and emotional reactions from different regional actors within the so-called New Silk Road regions, as the following headlines indicate: "The Economic Recolonialization of Africa: China's One Belt and Road Initiative;"[17] "India to Skip China's New Silk Road Forum;"[18] "Wie Europa und die USA Chinas neue Seidenstraße kontern wollen;"[19] "BRI as Chance for Regional Cooperation: Iran–Armenia Economic Relations;"[20] "The New Silk Road: How a Rising Arab World Is Turning Away from the West and Rediscovering China."[21]

Political, mainly state-level actors from the West fear or foresee the BRI as the dawn of Sinocentrism.[22] In opposition to this, political and regional actors[23] from the so-called Global South as well as individual actors on the ground often have a more welcoming and assertive approach to participating in the BRI, as they consider it a facilitator for transregional partnerships on an equal footing.

17 https://medium.com/world-outlook/the-economic-recolonisation-of-africa-chinas-one-belt-and-road-initiative-bfe93281f05d (accessed 2 Aug. 2023).

18 https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-to-skip-chinas-new-silk-road-forum/articleshow/58656088.cms (accessed 2 Aug. 2023).

19 https://www.nzz.ch/wirtschaft/wie-europa-und-die-usa-chinas-neue-seidenstrasse-kontern-wollen-ld.1629494 (accessed 2 Aug. 2023).

20 https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/266448 (accessed 2 Aug. 2023).

21 https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230302075.

22 Sinocentrism refers to China's once-prominent position in the world. Promoted by Confucianism, Sinocentrism revealed itself most visibly during the time of the Ancient Silk Roads. Until the war with Western forces in the 19th and 20th centuries, China's self-image and representation was that of a harmonious society and one superior to other cultures.

23 This book comprises analyses not only of bilateral state actor practices and communication but also of non-state actors. Therefore, with regional actors, we include a variety of differing people, institutions, and organizations that are engaging in the BRI. Regional actors may hence embody non-state actors, communal politicians, NGOs, collectives, and individuals whose realities are involved with or influenced by BRI-related projects. When referring to such a broad perspective of regional actors, we stress and prevent a top-down analysis of BRI projects and diversify academic analysis on a grounded, local level.

For example, whereas political leaders in Germany remained rather cautious and suspicious, those in Pakistan,[24] Tanzania,[25] and Kazakhstan[26] welcomed the initiative and anticipated more benefits than drawbacks to their societies. Reactions also came from those who were either involuntarily or voluntarily "excluded" from a BRI network, namely, from the political leaders of India[27] and the United States of America.[28] Such a mix of differing reactions seems to culminate in one question: What does the Chinese government want to achieve with its New Silk Road, and what is in it for us?

Academic research on the BRI has formed a broad new research line that is referred to as "New Silk Road studies."[29] In China, studies on the Belt and Road Initiative have evolved into an academic discipline (新丝路学). Elsewhere, especially in the Global North, publications on Silk Road studies that analyze the Belt and Road Initiative and its implications have dramatically increased, especially in the social sciences: In order to grasp the enormous dimension of the BRI and its impact on societies, foreign politics, security, national and regional economics, or new connectivities between China, Eurasia, and Africa, multidisciplinary volumes investigate the BRI as a large, China-led infrastructure project (*The China-led Belt and Road Initiative and its Reflections*: *The Crisis of Hegemony and Changing Global Orders,* Amineh 2023; *Global Perspectives on China's Belt and Road Initiative: Assertive Agency Through Regional Connectivity*, Schneider 2021; *The Belt and Road Initiative: What's In It for China?*, Johnston 2019). Most overview literature focuses on aspects of financial investment and risk and their impact on international trade. In Silk Road studies, "trade" refers not only to tangible goods but also to intangible goods and connective practices. Overall, studies seem divided "between those who think of it as a tool serving China's geopolitical interests and rise at the world

24 Jadoon, Arshad, Muhammad Imran Khan, Muhammad Khan, and Yechi Ma. "Socio-Economic Impacts of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor on Pakistan and China Economy." European Academic Research, vol. 5, 2017, pp. 4140–4157.

25 https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46364342 (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

26 https://thediplomat.com/2015/12/china-and-kazakhstan-roads-belts-paths-and-steps/ (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

27 https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2018C07_wgn_Tripathi.pdf (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

28 https://time.com/4992103/china-silk-road-belt-xi-jinping-khorgos-kazakhstan-infrastructure/, https://www.voanews.com/a/usa_us-offer-alternative-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative/6206928.html (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

29 Outlining all the findings of New Silk Road studies would expand the format of this introduction.

stage, and those who see it as a more nebulous and fragmented undertaking driven by domestic economic and political pressures" (Alves and Lee 2022).

New Silk Road studies are differentiating into an increasing number of subtopics and tackle the BRI with a more regionalized and thematically nuanced approach to disentangle its multilayered nature. Emerging topics include sustainability or Green Silk Road (Thees 2020), Digital Silk Road (Chan 2022), Health Silk Road (Ngeow 2020), Polar Silk Road (Woon 2020), Academic Silk Road (Marginson et al. 2020), and Heritage Silk Road (Winter 2018), to name but a few. Such differentiation in subtopics reveals not only the areas that are touched by the BRI infrastructure project but the nature of the goods which are traded along the New Silk Roads.

What have been under-researched so far are phenomena of culture in the context of the BRI. Tim Winter's latest research is one of the most relevant publications to highlight here. In *Geocultural Power* (2019), Winter emphasizes culture and heritage as key instruments for China's foreign policy and its aim to create win–win situations and sovereignty in a Eurasian and African region through the reconstitution of a shared past and heritage. He analyzes a deliberate use of the past to smooth the path for a Sinocentric BRI for political and economic reasons (in Chinese foreign policy) as well as for internal reasons (in Chinese domestic policy) (Winter 2019: 190). This practice is nothing new but an age-old strategy prevalent in domestic Chinese politics (Mao referred to it as 故为今用). What *is* new here is the recurrence of the past and its strategic application in the international arena.[30] It is a rhetorical device that has been aptly termed "historical statecraft" (Mayer 2018). Tackling the BRI from a decidedly cultural and emotional perspective is developing into an emerging research line. The Chinese government emphasizes people-to-people connectivity as one of the five constitutive pillars of the BRI but seems to have no clear implementation guidelines so far (Kidd 2022).

3 The Chinese Dream: A Polysemic Narrative

Upon a closer look, especially when we engage with inner-Chinese concerns, contemporary Silk Road Narratives contain another narrative that has developed into an important tool to foster people-to-people connectivity and to legitimize political, economic, and cultural practices: the so-called Chinese Dream (中国梦).

The Chinese Dream was officially announced by Xi Jinping in 2012 as a sociocultural and sociopolitical goal for China, only one year before the official announcement of the BRI. It basically refers to the "rejuvenation of the Chinese

30 We would like to thank Ágota Révész for this input.

nation," achieved by the centenary of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 2049 (cf. Loh 2019: 169).

The Chinese Dream has been tackled and defined from a variety of perspectives (Callahan 2013, Callahan 2016a, Callahan 2016b, Fasulo 2016, Loh 2019, Casas-Klett and Li 2021, Peters et al. 2022), and its focus has been attributed to various areas, for example, higher education, patriotism, philosophy, spirituality, or social sciences (Loh 2019: 170).

In the context of our book, we focus on the Chinese Dream as one of the above-mentioned Silk Road narratives—if not its most prominent one. Although it remains relatively vague, seems amendable, and has not been clearly defined as a concept (Wang 2014: 2), the Chinese Dream can be seen as a stable but polysemic narrative (Loh 2019: 170) within the PRC's infrastructure projects offered to the world and developed into "the signature ideology for Xi's term" (Wang 2014: 1).

The idea to "rejuvenate" *(fùxīng)* or modernize (Loh 2019: 169) the nation has been mentioned before Xi (cf. Gallelli 2019: 7–8). As a key element of the concept, the (national) rejuvenation has been used by Chinese leaders before him. According to Wang (2014: 3), the term "rejuvenation" has a long tradition in the history of China and its national experience. The historical trauma underlying the concept of rejuvenation in this narrative refers to the century of national humiliation beginning with the first Opium War in 1839, continuing with the Boxer Wars around 1900, and ending in the middle of the 20th century with the Second Sino-Japanese War. Such "chosen traumas" (as well as "chosen glories") function well in defining a group identity (Wang 2014: 3, referring to Johan Galtung's work). The narrative of the century of humiliation, in turn, would not function without an even deeper layer, which is the narrative of the glorious ancient Chinese civilization. Wang (2014: 3–4) describes this chain of legitimizing narratives as follows: "As citizens of the 'Central Kingdom,' the Chinese feel a strong sense of chosenness and pride at their ancient civilization and achievements. Chinese refer to the humiliating experience in the face of Western and Japanese incursion as national trauma. After suffering a great decline of national strength and status, this group has strong determination to revive its past glory and strength. That is the Chinese Dream."

Despite its historical antecedents, the Chinese Dream was not introduced as a political concept of the PRC until 2012, when Xi was elected the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and, therefore, the leader of the PRC. Since then, the Chinese Dream has been regularly and increasingly mentioned in Xi Jinping's domestic and international speeches[31] (Wang 2014) and has become

31 For an overview of a selection of speeches, see article on People's Daily Online (people.cn) "General Secretary Xi Jinping's 15 speeches systematically elaborated the 'Chinese Dream,'"

quite visible in the public urban and medial spaces of Chinese cities: Posters, slogans, billboards, exhibitions, and video documentaries—often with English translations—emerge on screens in metro stations, on public streets, or at state museums or are broadcast on Chinese television channels.[32]

In a recorded speech on the occasion of the public congress day depicted in an ARTE documentary of 2021, Xi Jinping announced: "We sons and daughters of the Chinese nation will work together to make our dream of national rebirth a reality. China will occupy a central position in the world and make a great contribution to the welfare of the people."[33]

Xi regularly introduces the Chinese Dream as the "Chinese dream of (achieving) the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (People's Daily Online 2013) or, as Wang puts it, "to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream for the Chinese nation in modern history" (Wang 2014: 1). It expresses the aim to regain the power and influence of the former Chinese empire by 2049, when the People's Republic of China turns 100 years old, as his keynote speech at the Fifth Meeting of BRICS Leaders "Working Together for Joint Development" on March 27, 2013 demonstrates:

> 大家都很关心中国的未来发展。面向未来，中国将相继朝着两个宏伟目标前进：一是到2020年国内生产总值和城乡居民人均收入比2010年翻一番，全面建成惠及十几亿人口的小康社会。二是到2049年新中国成立100年时建成富强民主文明和谐的社会主义现代化国家。
>
> Everyone is concerned about the future development of China. Looking to the future, China will move towards two ambitious goals in succession: first, to double its gross domestic product and per capita income of urban and rural residents by 2020 compared to 2010, and to build a moderately prosperous society benefiting more than one billion people in all aspects. The second is to build a rich, strong, democratic, civilized, and harmonious socialist modern state by 2049, the 100th year since the founding of New China.[34] (Example 1)

The excerpt of Xi's speech of 2013 in Example 1 demonstrates the two important steps to achieve the goal of the Chinese Dream: firstly, the development into

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publishing excerpts of Xi Jinping's speeches from the years 2012–13 in which the Chinese Dream occurs.

32 Adeli 2023, field memo 3.

33 Quote by Xi Jinping in "Die Neue Welt des Xi Jinping" (France, 2021), art documentary by Sophie Lepault and Romain Franklin.

34 http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0619/c40531-21891787.html (accessed 28 Mar. 2023). All Chinese excerpts translated using DeepL (deepl.com).

a moderately prosperous society and, secondly, the modernization of the PRC. The development into a moderately prosperous society clearly links Xi's Chinese Dream back to the political goals and narratives of his predecessors—above all, Hu Jintao, who used the narrative of the "well-off society" *(xiǎokāng shèhuì)*. "The Party promised that China's per capita GDP would be up to the level of moderately developed countries by 2021, the CCP's centennial" (Wang 2014: 7).

In Xi's words, the narrative of the moderately prosperous society sounds as follows:

> 我们已经确定了今后的奋斗目标，这就是到中国共产党成立100年时全面建成小康社会 […]
>
> We have set the goal of our future struggle, which is to build a moderately prosperous society in all aspects by the 100th year of the founding of the Communist Party of China […] (Xi Jinping, Speech at the Seminar with Representatives of National Model Workers, 28 April 2013)[35] (Example 2)

According to Xi Jinping, the first step to achieve the goal of the Chinese Dream has, indeed, already been achieved. At the celebration ceremony of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the CCP on July 1st 2021, he announced that "China has realized the first centenary goal of 'building a moderately prosperous society in all respects.'"[36]

The formation of a strong, homogeneous, and collective Chinese national identity is another goal of the Chinese Dream. It is certainly subtler, but increasingly notable. Such collective national identity is supposed to function as the foundation of the envisioned Chinese socialist society and serves as a conscious opposition to Western values. Many passages of Xi's various speeches on this topic point to this formation of identity and talk about how Chinese citizens are supposed to behave and society ought to function, as the following examples show:

> 中华民族是具有非凡创造力的民族，我们创造了伟大的中华文明，我们也能够继续拓展和走好适合中国国情的发展道路。全国各族人民一定要增强对中国特色社会主义的理论自信、道路自信、制度自信，坚定不移沿着正确的中国道路奋勇前进。
>
> The Chinese nation is a nation of extraordinary creativity; we have created a great Chinese civilization, and we are able to continue to expand and follow a development path that suits China's national conditions. The people of all

35 http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0619/c40531-21891787-2.html (accessed 28 Mar. 2023).

36 http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/c23934/202107/6ff93d39da7548fbae37cbed01184c34.shtml (accessed 28 Mar. 2023).

> nationalities must enhance their confidence in the theory, road, and system of socialism with Chinese characteristics and move forward unswervingly along the correct Chinese path. (Xi Jinping, Speech at the First Session of the Twelfth National People's Congress, 17 March 2013)[37] (Example 3)

> 尽管前进道路并不平坦，改革发展稳定任务仍很艰巨而繁重，但面对未来，我们充满必胜信心。我国工人阶级一定要在坚持中国道路、弘扬中国精神、凝聚中国力量上发挥模范带头作用，万众一心、众志成城，为实现中华民族伟大复兴的中国梦而不懈奋斗。
>
> Although the road ahead is not smooth and the task of reform, development, and stability is still arduous and heavy, we are confident of victory in the face of the future. Our working class must play an exemplary and leading role in upholding the Chinese Way, carrying forward the Chinese spirit and uniting Chinese forces, so that all people can work with one heart and one mind to achieve the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. (Xi Jinping, Speech at the Seminar with Representatives of National Model Workers, 28 April 2013)[38] (Example 4)

Examples 3 and 4 clearly demonstrate China's aspirations for power in establishing socialism with Chinese characteristics as its political foundation. On the basis of these communication examples, together with empirical observations regarding the visual representation of Chinese Dream slogans on screens and billboards in the public, the concept of the Chinese Dream embodies the (re)formation of a homogenous, collective, national Chinese identity, one seemingly characterized by the practice of social and political "Othering" (Shaw 2015). Observing the communication patterns of the Chinese Dream as demonstrated in the examples above, the Chinese Dream can be regarded as a political tool of defining the "Chinese Self" against the "global Other." Needless to say, this identity construction is not exclusively found in the context of China but also elsewhere, where an "imagined national self" needs to be projected against a "national Other."[39]

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37 http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0619/c40531-21891787-2.html (accessed 28 Mar. 2023).

38 http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0619/c40531-21891787-2.html (accessed 28 Mar. 2023).

39 The concept of identity as a figure of thought and analysis has been questioned and critiqued (Moran 2014, Brubaker and Cooper 2000) due to its narrowing focus on difference; its neglect of class, structure, politics, and social relations; and its distortion of senses of belonging in societies. Despite that, identity provides valuable insights to various disciplines

Example 5 further underlines another notable feature of the Chinese Dream: its merging with the person and politics of Xi Jinping.

> The Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era makes the following things clear: […] It makes clear that major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics aims to foster a new type of international relations and build a community with a shared future for mankind. (Xi Jinping, Speech at the 19th National Congress of the CCP 18 October 2017)[40] (Example 5)

Over time, the person Xi Jinping and his role as leader of the CCP have coalesced to such an extent that Chinese media have coined the term *Xiplomacy*.[41] The term has evolved into a flexible figurehead to which both domestic and foreign policy issues can be assigned. It has thus been used by Chinese media to report on the World Environment Day, with the title "Xiplomacy: Xi's vision of a prosperous, clean, beautiful world,"[42] as well as on Xi's proposals for a global security plan, "Xiplomacy: China-proposed initiatives focus on global development, security."[43] It has, furthermore, been adopted by scholars and used in connection with analyses of Xi Jinping's foreign policy (see, e.g., Tomé 2021). The focus on Xi Jinping's persona, which could almost be described as a personality cult, and the accompanying personification of Chinese politics as Xiplomacy show a clear departure from Deng Xiaoping's policies: "There is a widespread agreement among scholars in deeming this new definition of PRC on the international scene as an official departure from Deng Xiaoping's taoguangyanghui 韬光养晦 "hiding one's capacities and bide one's time" towards a more proactive and assertive role, what has been recaptured in the four-character phrase fenfa you wei 奋发有 为 "strive for achievements" (Gallelli 2019: 101).

Similar to the concept of the BRI, the Chinese Dream has been communicated in synchronization with the changing political and economic status of the PRC (The

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and research topics, and it continues to serve as a relevant category and reality when critically engaging with processes of regionalization and localization of cultures.

40 https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-11/04/content_34115212.htm (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

41 http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/08/c_139795116.htm; https://thediplomat.com/2022/10/laos-and-xiplomacy/ (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

42 https://english.mee.gov.cn/News_service/media_news/202106/t20210605_836425.shtml (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

43 https://english.news.cn/20220913/f161157611ad4eadba563d273c601ec4/c.html (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

Economist 2022).[44] Despite that, its core intention was to regain a collective Chinese national identity after the century of humiliation at the hands of former Western empires like Britain, France, Germany, and Japan. At this point, it is interesting to note that it is not coincidental that the term Chinese Dream resembles the expression "American Dream." Xi Jinping defines China as a "great power" (*dàguó* 大国),[45] implying that China has risen to the status of the US, further indicating that China used to be and shall be a powerful political player in the global arena and acts in a harmonious way (in opposition to former Western powers, which humiliated China in the past) (cf. Gallelli 2019: 104–105). However, in alluding to the notion of the American Dream, the Chinese Dream can be regarded as the result of Othering: the juxtaposition of the Chinese Dream with the American interpretation reveals Xi's aim to rise to an American "status level" by nourishing the Chinese Dream's "Chineseness."

The metaphor of the "dream" has evolved into a significant buzzword in Xi Jinping's political communication—not only in reference to the US but also in building up connectivity in the framework of the BRI. On one of his tours promoting the BRI, for example, Xi Jinping strived to bridge the sociocultural and socio-economic gap between the African continent and China by trying to transfer the Chinese Dream into an "African context." During his visit to Tanzania in March 2013, for example, Xi Jinping compared the Chinese Dream to the "African Dream," talking about "the dream of over 1.3 billion Chinese people for great national renewal and the dream of over 1 billion African people for gaining strength from unity and achieving development and rejuvenation. The Chinese and African people should enhance solidarity, cooperation, mutual support, and assistance to realize the dreams," he said, adding, "We should also work with the rest of the world to realize the dream of a world of enduring peace and common prosperity."[46] The

44 https://www.economist.com/china/2022/11/10/xi-jinping-amends-the-chinese-dream (accessed 10 Oct. 2023).

45 The practice of Xi Jinping defining China as "great power" and the recent shift of Chinese foreign policy that is directed towards interaction with other "great powers" can be subsumed under "great power politics" (大国政治) or "great power diplomacy." It basically describes Xi Jinping's new, assertive foreign policy approach that envisions a more hegemonic position on the world stage and differs from the previous president Deng Xiaoping's approach of "hiding one's capacities and biding one's time" (taoguangyanghui 韬光养晦) (Gallelli 2019: 101) or, in other words, keeping a low profile when interacting with other political powers (cf. Smith 2021). See Gallelli (2019: 100–101) for a discussion of great power politics from a linguistic perspective and Smith (2021) and Noesselt et al. (2021) for a discussion of Chinese great power diplomacy from a political science perspective.

46 http://tz.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/sgbx/201308/t20130822_6095730.htm (accessed 4 Apr. 2023).

example above of the "African Dream"[47] that Xi Jinping connects to the Chinese Dream not only demonstrates the relevance of both the BRI and the Chinese Dream as narratives but also stresses how the Chinese Dream (or other "national dreams") and the BRI are interrelated and how the meaning-making practices of a narrative unfold: The BRI is the overarching architecture that connects local, regional, and transnational infrastructures at hubs that form a BRI-related project. Here, at the various intersections of the hub, the Chinese Dream encounters other "dreams," which leads to bilateral negotiations concerning the fields of economics, finance, culture, and politics. Thus, the BRI is a powerful tool to implement the Chinese Dream and to connect the dreams of selected nations. Against that background, the Chinese Dream can be defined as a narrative-communicating-strategy emphasizing *how* China will become a "great power" or, more precisely, the greatest military and economic power in the world by 2049.

Narratives give practices the stability and endurance to link events and ideas and to legitimize strategies. It is therefore not surprising that political state actors use narratives to realize domestic and international goals. Such practice has been given the label of historical statecraft: the "systematic application of representations of the past (real or imagined) in order to frame and legitimize foreign policy, naturalize a certain image or role of a country, and stabilize collective identities on national, regional and global levels ('communalization')" (Mayer 2018: 1222). In the case of both the historic and contemporary Silk Road narratives (see Section 2) and the narrative of the Chinese Dream, it becomes apparent that these specific narratives are social practices, communicated from the state level. Indeed, although it was mentioned before that Xi Jinping has a fluid, adaptive nature, the Chinese Dream as a socio-political concept "remains under solid control from the Party" (Loh 2019: 173), one which, together with the BRI narrative, constitutes the "signature program of Xi Jinping" (Loh 2019: 168). The aim of these narratives is to configure practices and messages that reach either other states (foreign policy) or Chinese citizens (domestic policy). As Loh suggests, Xi further uses them for social control (Loh 2019: 192) and assumes this narrative strategy to streamline and control the state is even more successful than Mao's use of "violence and upheaval" and Deng's use of "economic growth to buy loyalty" (Loh 2019: 192).

47 It should be noted that there does not seem to be a notion of a unified "African Dream" in the sense that Xi Jinping uses it in his speech here (if at all, the term is usually used in the plural as "African Dreams" to show that the people on the continent have assuredly different versions of this dream). It can thus be considered to be a rhetorical figure that Xi uses in order to create a feeling of belonging in his audience.

In this light, the BRI can be regarded as the operationalization of the Chinese Dream; a tool to implement China's goal for its future position in forming a new geocultural region and its position as a new global power. Whereas the Chinese Dream is considered a Chinese narrative with a domestic focus, addressed to domestic audiences to tune China into becoming the world's major military and economic power by 2049, the China-led BRI with its Silk Road narratives can be regarded as the strategic implementation of a large-scale transregional infrastructure that helps to translate China's ambition to "rejuvenate the nation" and, hence, to regain global power in politics and economics. As we have shown, Xi Jinping uses the past and ideas of the past to create a new present and future. In that present and future, culture plays an increasingly decisive role: In one variation of the Chinese Dream, it is an explicit goal to build up China's cultural strength to achieve national rejuvenation and a collective identity (Loh 2019: 170).

The reference to a shared past also plays a major role in the relationship between China and Africa and, therefore, also in the realization of BRI projects. A central figure here (as already mentioned above) is the navigator Zheng He, who not only established contact between China and the African continent at an early stage in history but also left behind descendants through his crew and, thus, a legacy. Large (2008: 47) comments on this as follows: "However, the way in which history plays in the present is revealing. The symbolic and more instrumental uses of a shared, interpreted past is one salient facet of China's officially mobilized version of its historical connections with Africa today, the flipside of which often comes in the form of virtuous commitments against any future hegemonic role."

4 Structure of the Book

In this book, we juxtapose texts that engage with the notion of a China-led BRI from the perspective of narratives as cultural practices. Culture and cultural practices are understood as an analytical category and key research subject for approaching and analyzing different regional reactions to the BRI. Considering cultural practices as critical regional and local knowledge production, we want to understand how people-to-people connectivity (a frequently communicated, constitutive pillar in China-led BRI projects) and disconnectivity evolve along both the tangible and intangible infrastructures of the BRI. Since we are interested in understanding patterns of thought and practices, we decided to take an actor-centric approach to regional and local BRI responses, aiming to tackle the production of knowledge spaces from a local and regional viewpoint that spans Sino-African relations.

The following chapters introduce and describe (trans)regional actors and their agencies in relation to notions of old and new Silk Roads, the Chinese Dream, and BRI-related projects, thereby vivifying what Schneider (2021) emphasizes as a helpful approach to investigate agency in the context of the BRI: Instead of reducing nation states to single actors, the contributors of this book differentiate and analyze agencies related to specific local and regional actors. Hence, a top-down perspective, which often concentrates on the assumed "dangers" or risks of the China-led BRI for participating countries (for example, debt-trap [e.g., Were 2018], environmental pollution [e.g., Ascensão et al. 2018],[48] or neocolonialism [e.g., Deych 2019, Murray 2022]) is being sidelined.[49] In this publication, we highlight a bottom-up perspective by describing and analyzing (re)actions and practices of local and regional actors that are experiencing an altered reality due to the China-led BRI project. Our observations and results are both embedded in and projected against the narratives we perceived as drivers of a newly forming geocultural and geopolitical region.

As already mentioned in Section 1, we focus on narratives and cultural practices that can be observed in the relation between China and the African continent. In view of China's continuing, unrelenting engagement combined with a considerable amount of "success stories" and drawbacks on the one hand and diverse (re)actions across the continent on the other, we consider it a fruitful and promising approach to dedicate our attention to the interaction between China and the African continent.

48 See also https://blogs.worldbank.org/trade/three-opportunities-and-three-risks-belt-and-road-initiative, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/environmental-damage-from-belt-and-road-initiative-projects-on-rise/articleshow/101715401.cms?from=mdr (accessed 9 Oct. 2023).

49 It has to be noted here that, on the state level, the BRI has provoked several reactions in the form of alternative initiatives that aim to compete with it: In 2021, the EU launched its Global Gateway project, and in 2022, Joe Biden launched the US-led "Build Back Better World (B3W)" plan (cf. Masina 2022). India and Turkey also launched their own national initiatives. Turkey has the Middle Corridor (MC), a railway network connecting Turkey and Central Asia also referred to as the Turkish version of the Silk Road initiative (https://www.mei.edu/publications/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-and-turkeys-middle-corridor-question-compatibility [accessed 9 Oct. 2023]) and is currently competing more and more with China in building infrastructure in Africa (https://www.mei.edu/publications/building-africa-turkeys-third-way-chinas-shadow, https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Turkey-jockeys-with-China-for-influence-in-Africa) (accessed 9 Oct. 2023). Finally, India also established an alternative to the BRI with its India–West Asia–Europe corridor (see, e.g., https://economictimes.indiatimes.com//news/economy/foreign-trade/india-west-asia-europe-corridor-deal-offers-an-alternative-to-chinas-bri/articleshow/103540710.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst [accessed 9 Oct. 2023]).

Here, we analyze cultural practices referring to contemporary fine art, video art, novels, and poetry. We further look at cultural politics in the format of cultural institutions like art organizations and cultural promotion organizations (in particular, the Confucius Institute). Perceptions of Tanzanian Chinese language students and the practice of learning Chinese in Tanzania are analyzed in order to understand cultural policies as local and regional responses to the various narratives along the New Silk Road.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I (Chapters 1–3) deals with the functions of art and cultural heritage within the context of the Chinese Dream and BRI-related narratives.

In Chapter 1, Sophia Kidd engages with an inner-Chinese perspective and the present political economy of culture as an approach to challenge "Western notions" of the BRI. She underlines the potential of the development of a political economy of culture carried out by Chinese actors at various levels (state, sub-state, and grassroot). Kidd emphasizes the perspective of China's aspiration to act as a cultural hegemon in New Silk Road Regions, thereby focussing on the role of culture to (re)engage as "developer" of cultural hubs along the New Silk Roads.

Chapter 2 investigates the role of art and cultural heritage in relation to cultural politics within New Silk Road Regions. Jamila Adeli uses the lens of art and exhibition making to shed light on a new relation between the Chinese state and its cultural policy that emerges due to China's geostrategic and geocultural aspirations. By engaging with various exhibition practices at Chinese museums, the author demonstrates the role of art as local and regional developer that aims to construct and strengthen a Chinese cultural identity that fits into narratives on the Chinese Dream and the New Silk Roads. She further analyzes artworks as the producers of critical (counter)narratives on current cultural politics that reveal a future of asymmetrical power relations within New Silk Road Regions.

Chapter 3 is a conversation between Jamila Adeli and art historian and art journalist Minh An Szabó de Bucs on the infrastructural shift in China that transforms the Chinese art scene, both locally and internationally. The recent rise of China as an aspiring cultural hegemon is demonstrated by examples of the Chinese state agency wielded in a new relation to the power of art and cultural heritage in the context of the BRI and the Chinese Dream.

Part II (Chapters 4–5) looks at the narrative of the Chinese Dream and the BRI from an African literary perspective.

Chapter 4, by Susanne Gehrmann, is a literary analysis of the poem "There Is a New Train Coursing through Our Lands (Mandarin song)" by Nigerian poet Remi Raji. Before starting the analysis of Raji's poem, however, Gehrmann gives a concise overview of dreaming with respect to Africa–China relations (also prior to the start of the BRI) in other literary works by authors from the African

continent. In doing so, Gehrmann raises important concepts that are also relevant for the understanding of Raji's poem, such as (un)equal opportunities and projections into the future (African utopia vs. dystopia). In her analysis of Raji's poem, Gehrmann skillfully carves out its complexity, revealing its references to the current political and economic relationship between the African continent and China. Gehrmann gives us an understanding of all the hidden references and shows us Raji's rather dark and pessimistic view of Chinese presence and neocolonial behavior on the African continent.

Chapter 5 then deals with the critical reflection of the Chinese Dream in the novel *The Dragonfly Sea* by the Kenyan author Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor[50]. In this paper, Daniel Kossmann starts off with a historical derivation of the Chinese Dream. Unlike the approach taken in this introductory chapter, Kossmann describes the Chinese Dream from a political perspective and then links it with the BRI. He then turns to the narrative of and about the Chinese Dream and the BRI and describes how, in foreign policy, these narratives are used in order to integrate other nations' (or even continents') dreams, like the so-called "African Dream." Against this background, Kossmann then analyzes passages of *The Dragonfly Sea* in which Owuor indirectly (i.e. without mentioning the term) but clearly talks about a Kenyan perspective on the Chinese Dream.

Part III (Chapters 6–8) engages with Chinese and African cultural and language policy (particularly at the Confucius Institutes) and analyzes how the narratives of the Chinese Dream and the BRI are reflected upon by local agents in Tanzania and Ghana.

Chapter 6 is an empirical study of Tanzanian students learning Chinese at the university level in Tanzania. The authors, Daud Samwel Masanilo and Linda Ammann, are particularly interested in the motivation of Tanzanians to learn Chinese and the effects of learning Chinese (and potentially joining other cultural activities) on their attitude towards Chinese speakers. Teaching Chinese and Chinese culture is an explicit cultural–political means of and tool for ensuring the success of China's BRI project. Thus, the aim of the study is to get a first impression of how students participating in Chinese classes perceive the Chinese presence and their interaction with Chinese citizens in Tanzania. Furthermore, through the large number of comments and statements by the study participants, the authors are able to reflect on the awareness of China's cultural policy and diplomacy in Tanzania.

50 A De:link // Re:link podcast interview with Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor hosted by Daniel Kossmann in collaboration with Linda Ammann Gerlach and John Njenga Karugia can be listened to at https://doi.org/10.11588/heidicon/23847848.

In Chapter 7, Adams Bodomo, Cliff Mboya, and Bright Nkrumah tackle the positioning and politics of the Confucius Institute (CI) at the University of Ghana, in Accra. The aim of the case study is to investigate the real impact that the CI has on Ghanaian society. Based on literature reviewed on the CI in Africa as well as on participatory observation of a day-long activity at the CI in Ghana, the authors propose that the activities of the CIs in Ghana are a representative example that clearly show the asymmetry in power relations between China and the African continent.

Chapter 8 is an interview with Ghanaian academic and professor for African linguistics and literature Adams Bodomo, led by Linda Ammann in collaboration with Daniel Kossmann and John Njenga Karugia. In the interview, he discusses local reactions to the BRI in Ghana, cultural politics and diplomacy around the Confucius Institutes on the African continent, asymmetrical cultural policy between China and Africa, and power structures. He also touches upon issues such as the so-called debt trap, cultural identity, and neo- and decolonization.

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Part I

Cultural Practices and Cultural Politics

Chapter 1

New Silk Roads

Shifting the Register to China

Sophia Kidd

Whether we like it or not China's discursive register is now an insistent intervention on that of a previously (perceived) dominant "West."—Paul Gladston[1]

This study attempts to reintegrate cultural focus into the study of China's New Silk Roads (NSR), which has up until now been primarily focused upon political and economic implications of this massive international project, also known as One Belt One Road (OBOR) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). There is an understudied official "pillar" to the New Silk Roads, officially titled people-to-people connectivity (*mínxīn xiāngtōng* 民心相通), meaning literally to connect the hearts and minds and of people with the hearts and minds of other people. We will analyze how this cultural component works, what it means, and why it's essential for the other four pillars of NSR to function in the long term (Yaling 2019).

When China successfully cultivates people-to-people (P2P) connectivity within its partner regions, such as with Pakistan, Kenya, or Kazakhstan, it is able to have a relatively strong hand in cultural imaginaries being generated. Outside of New Silk Road partner regions, however, China is less effective at controlling the narrative. In Western Europe, the UK, and in the US, for example, representations of the New Silk Roads are often derogatory and pessimistic, focused on geopolitics and geoeconomics and generally dismissive of win–win models of global governance.

1 Paul Gladston, in an email correspondence with Sophia Kidd, April 5 2021, cf: Gladston (2020).

Sophia Kidd, New Silk Roads: Shifting the Register to China. In: Jamila Adeli and Linda Ammann (eds.), New Silk Road Narratives: Local Perspectives on Chinese Presence along the Belt and Road Initiative. Heidelberg: Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing, 2024, pp. 37–51. https://doi.org/10.11588/hasp.1370.c19719

China's opponents, known as "dragon-slayers," focus on questions of human rights, alleging and arguing that China is either abusing its regional sovereignty, as in Xinjiang and Tibet, or altogether not entitled to that sovereignty, as with Taiwan and Hong Kong. In the past, China did not have much of a voice in many of the world's top councils, such as the United Nations and World Trade Organization; a situation which has changed much. Although China still has no presence in top councils such as the Quad nations and G7, where developed liberal-order nations consolidate power and consensus, China has created its own organizations, such as the Shanghai Company Organization (SCO), and increased its role in regional organizations such as ASEAN. These platforms give China a greater voice by which its rebuttals of liberal-order accusations of human-rights and other abuses can be heard. This voice is also projected through greater channels of cultural power that are cultivated through cultural and creative industry development (such as movies, newspapers, social media, technology, and sports) as well as cultural diplomacy (both official and "back-door") throughout New Silk Road regions and beyond.

This paper focuses on cultural power, which influences the way foreign audiences think about China and also influences *the frameworks of thought* in which China is contextualized, i.e., the *register* of China discourse. This cultural power does not arise in a vacuum. Rather, it is *shifted away* and out of the hands of Western social science and cultural studies discourse, as well as away from the representations produced by Western cultural and creative industries (such as Hollywood, *The Guardian,* Meta, and Twitter). This cultural power consists of the ability to shift the register of the "China conversation" ever so slightly so as to encourage foreign audiences to think about Chinese cultural values as something that can inform their own world view in a beneficial way.

The structure of this paper will dwell first upon the notion of "cultural imaginaries" before discussing the problem of "cultural discount" as something which operates against the "cultural imaginary" of China's New Silk Roads. We then set forth a typology of New Silk Road people-to-people connectivity, consisting of top-down complementary, grassroots complementary, grassroots supplementary, and combinant people-to-people connectivities. I then discuss combinant P2P (which essentially combines public-sector cultural policy with private-sector grassroots initiatives) as an ideal form of people-to-people connectivity that China has developed within China, but has not yet developed outside of China (which, I suggest, accounts for a lot of the international pushback against China and the New Silk Roads). I give examples of combinant P2P within China's borders, and as I have not found a precedent for this combinatory P2P outside of China, I suggest a possible site and a basic outline for such a model in Rey Tehran, Iran, providing context of that site's historical and local cultural conditions to illustrate needs for cultural infrastructure and economic diversification.

1 Evoking Cultural Imaginaries

The Ancient Silk Road evokes a compelling geocultural imaginary.[2] Images of merchants riding atop camels loaded down with wares, travelling into the sunset or from beneath a rising sun, make us curious about a world we may imagine as slower-paced, less homogenous, and somehow more beautiful than the one we live in today. Layers of Silk Road historical "sedimentation" allude earliest to millennia of trade throughout Afro-Eurasia prior to Confucius in China or Jesus Christ in Christian regions. Another layer arises out of the Chinese Han dynasties (213 BCE–220 CE), which saw Buddhism travel along the Silk Road from India to China, around the same time that Christianity climbed out of Northeast Africa and Western Asia into the Caucasus, Europe, and Central Asia. Then there is a later, more extensive and carefully documented layer appearing in the Chinese Tang dynasty (613 CE–920 CE). Already well-established and documented, the geocultural imaginary evoked by China's New Silk Roads (NSR) tends to be more palatable to our cultural sensibilities than "One Belt One Road" or "Belt and Road Initiative," which we usually learn of in the context of geopolitics. Perhaps this explains China's increasingly frequent use of New Silk Roads to refer to OBOR/BRI in media both within and outside of China.

These New Silk Roads, however, are not so imaginary. Indeed, they constitute a massive project building policy, facilities, trade, financial, and people-to-people connectivity throughout Afro-Eurasia (Miller 2019). These five priorities, or "pillars," as they are often translated in the literature, are officially known as: policy coordination (*zhèngcè gōutōng* 政策沟通), facilities connectivity (*shèshī liántōng* 设施联通), unimpeded trade (*màoyì chàngtōng* 贸易畅通), financial integration (*zījīn tōngróng* 资金通融), and people-to-people connectivity (Pinyin and Chinese characters given above).

The first four pillars involve newsworthy subjects concerning major finance institutions, famous politicians, military positioning, and shipping channels. The final pillar, however—that of people-to-people connectivity—is not as newsworthy, considered "soft news," and is often relegated to the arts and culture sections of newspapers and websites. Whereas positive reports of China's cultural influence upon the world rarely make news headlines, negative reports tend to be considered more newsworthy. Of course, this is not one-sided.

China's own major media outlets represent the West in similar ways. The ecology of cultural influence, however, is not the same. While official Chinese media outlets may malign the influence of Western culture and markets, Hollywood

2 "Geocultural power" is cultural power on a global scale, as understood in Winter (2019). This emphasis upon cultural power displaces a hard/soft power axis.

movies will top China's box office charts. While American, Korean, British, and Italian television shows will show up in the main feed of streaming television services, the same is not the case with Western box offices and streaming services. This points to what we discuss below in our discussion of "cultural discount" (*wénhuà zhékòu* 文化折扣), which sees the value of a nation's cultural product "discounted" once it is imported outside of its national borders.

2 Cultural Discount

People-to-people connectivity, when done effectively, has the power to bring domestic and local players into conversation with one another. When individuals connect on a cultural level in real time while, for example, talking about an artwork or discussing a character in a novel, there is a greater opportunity for nuance to arise. Nuanced cultural discussions have a greater chance of being unmediated by a dominant international discourse. There is more personal "skin" in the game, where the opinions of individuals, regardless of what the "official" view of Chinese art is, matter to the conversation at hand. Individuals taking part in cultural programming, such as a literary festival or an art exhibition, have more time and opportunity to think for themselves and are called upon to express their opinions and thoughts more openly. It is in these moments that true learning can occur, as open communication seeks channels through which to flow. When grassroots actors conceive and implement cultural programming like this, where dialogue and a spirit of criticality is fostered, the diversity of views serve to shift discourse away from the status quo.

If China were to optimize its people-to-people cultural programming in such a way as to allow these developments, then foreign audiences would be more open to learning about Chinese culture, even when the cultural values conveyed may challenge or even threaten their own cultural values. This would maximize the amount and quality of cultural information being absorbed, thereby decreasing the amount of "aesthetic footwork" foreign audiences feel burdened with when consuming a foreign cultural product. The concept of "aesthetic footwork" refers to the amount of work one has to do in order to understand the aesthetic framework, qualities, and characteristics of a cultural product such as an artwork, film, story, or even a video game. It is this heavy upfront investment of energy that foreign audiences tend to avoid. Thus, it takes a great deal of investiture on behalf of a source culture to find ways to entice foreign audiences to do this footwork in getting to know it. This is especially so when the foreign audience has an existing prejudice against or distrust of the source culture. The "othering" of Chinese culture, whether social or economic, devalues cultural product outside of China's borders.

3 People-to-people Connectivity

People-to-people connectivity includes primarily six things: health assistance, humanitarian assistance, academic exchange, professional exchange, cultural exchange, and creative sector development, both domestic and international. In developing ways to think and talk about this pillar of the New Silk Roads, I have opted for "appropriating" and "translating" Kadir Jun Ayhan's typology of people-to-people connectivity as a form of cultural diplomacy consisting of:

> […] intentional, political, and transboundary communication-based interactions between groups of people for public, rather than private interests that have or aim to have foreign policy implications. This definition excludes P2P interactions which are non-diplomatic, e.g. pure international exchanges which do not have political objectives or relevance to foreign policies, or anti-diplomatic, e.g. warfare activities.[3]

Ayhan's typology is useful in providing a model which examines where the funding for cultural programming derives from while also looking at which level of society is conceiving of the programming, as well as who is implementing it. This is all I have taken from Ayhan's model, however, choosing then to adapt the model to describe any people-to-people cultural programming that one public uses to communicate with another public. In this study, I am using Ayhan's typology to describe people-to-people cultural programming that introduces Chinese culture to foreign audiences. Whereas Ayhan ignores "P2P interactions which are non-diplomatic," I would suggest that all P2P interactions are, by their very nature of bringing foreign publics together, "diplomatic." Ayhan also ignores "pure international exchanges which do not have political objectives or relevance to foreign policies." I argue that all international exchanges have, to some extent, a political objective, whether on a purely political level or on economic or cultural levels.

Thus, in my typology, derived initially from Ayhan's own, I include all of what China includes in its fifth cultural pillar, such as public goods, private sector cultural programming, and public–private partnerships "meshing" to educate and/or learn from domestic and foreign publics. Although Ayhan's analysis does not fit our own exactly, the typology is very useful. In this analysis, people-to-people connections are classified into two categories, the first of which is directional, distinguishing top-down from grassroots (bottom-up) P2P programming. Top-down

3 https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/blog/typology-people-people-diplomacy#:~:text=I%20define%20people%2Dto%2Dpeople,to%20have%20foreign%20policy%20implications (accessed 29 Jan. 2021). Kadir Jun Ayhan, "A Typology of People-to-People Diplomacy," 2020.

P2P is designed as public policy initiatives meant to influence one or more target foreign populations; they are always funded by the government of the source culture, and they are always in alignment with the goals and objectives of policy makers in that culture. Grassroots P2P, then, is cultural programming conceived of by private individuals or private sector organizations of a source culture intended to influence a target foreign population. Ayhan's typology has two axes, and while its first axis of distinction is vertical (top-down or bottom-up / grassroots), the second axis is horizontal, or qualitative. Top-down P2P is always "complementary," that is, as we have mentioned, always in alignment with the cultural and policy priorities of the source culture. Grassroots P2P can either be "complementary," that is, in alignment, or it can be "supplementary"; in other words, it is *either* in alignment *or not* with the priorities of its source culture. Grassroots complementary P2P, then, is private-sector cultural programming which works to implement top-down government cultural priorities and is often funded by the government. Grassroots supplementary P2P, by contrast, is usually privately funded, allowing for a freedom to convey cultural values and priorities that are *or aren't* in alignment with their home culture's government. This last form of grassroots supplementary P2P often exists in cultural spaces where both cultural policy and infrastructure are relatively absent. Note that complementary and supplementary are not in opposition to one another. Supplementary P2P is not defined in relationship with top-down cultural programming. Supplementary P2P programming produces cultural messaging as relational, not necessarily oppositional, to top-down P2P cultural messaging. The last form of people-to-people cultural programming is something I have constructed entirely anew, and it involves a public–private composite effort between governments and private actors to create cultural programming which is allowed to exhibit a certain level of criticality towards the source culture's government but ultimately predisposes the minds of foreign audiences to an open-mindedness towards the source culture.

3.1 Top-down Complementary P2P

Examples of successful top-down complementary people-to-people programs in Belt and Road countries can be found in China's domestic education sector, which brings in large and diverse flows of intellectual and creative capital from Belt and Road countries, as well as from non-Belt and Road countries such as Western Europe, the UK, and the US. The demographics of foreign-exchange students have changed since the initiation of Xi Jinping's vision of the New Silk Roads as part of a "Community of Destiny" for humankind. At Sichuan University in Southwest China, for example, percentages of students coming from non-Belt and Road

regions have fallen, while students coming from Afro-Eurasia make up a larger percentage of the foreign student body. BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) University League and Double First Class University programs have been tasked with the mission to poise China for an optimized future in creative and tech sectors by 2050. Other projects more specifically targeted towards the Belt and Road include the university consortium of Maritime Silk Road, launched in Xiamen in October of 2018. This is an international university consortium, comprising over 60 universities from 17 countries and regions along the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Members of this consortium include the University of Sheffield, Sorbonne University, the University of Melbourne, the Victoria University of Wellington, and Nanyang Technological University.[4]

China's foreign-exchange education sector, however, has met with challenges. Hanban / Confucius Institute has recently rebranded as the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (CLEC, *zhōngwài yǔyán jiāoliú hézuò zhōngxīn* 中外语言交流合作中心). As of March 2021, there are still 51 Confucius Institutes in the US, with four more scheduled to close. 69 have closed down since 2014, most of these in the past two years. Many of them have closed due to conflict of interest, not being able to receive any federal dollars from the Department of Defense if there is a Confucius Institute on campus.[5] New people-to-people programs can be seen in CLEC programming, such as its "People-to-people Honorary" contest, which rewards and celebrates peoples' stories of cultural connection between China and other countries.[6]

3.2 Grassroots Complementary P2P

Grassroots complementary P2P is organic cultural programming in sync with and aligned with top-down cultural programming, funded by top-down agencies and actors, but conceived of and often implemented by grassroots individuals and organizations. An example of complementary cultural P2P programming can be found in the EU–China Literary Festival, which has been financed by the

4 This case study, as well as others discussed here in illustrating my typology for people-to-people connectivity, is largely excerpted from my book *Culture Paves the New Silk Roads* (2022).

5 https://www.nas.org/blogs/article/how_many_confucius_institutes_are_in_the_united_states (accessed 20 Jan. 2024).

6 CIUS Center Annual Report mentions a "people-to-people" honorary contest for "people-to-people" stories: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9vVIwo4oJz4 (accessed 10 Apr. 2022).

European Union and hosted by China. Peter Goff, scholar on China's publishing sector at Leeds University, conceived of the literary festival and presented his working model to Brussels in 2017, and then again in 2020. Peter Goff is also the founder and former owner of the Beijing, Suzhou, and Chengdu Bookworm Cafes, which hosted multiple annual iterations of the Bookworm International Literary Festival until the closure of the Bookworm Cafes in Suzhou and Chengdu prior to 2019, when Goff left China to pursue his PhD.

Another example of grassroots complementary P2P would be many of the large-scale art biennials and triennials throughout China. These are often conceived of by local actors who normally operate within the private sector, putting on smaller-scale exhibitions with private funding from real-estate or tech industry actors. The Chengdu Biennale, for example, has seen eight iterations between 2001 and 2023, and in each instance a private sector curator proposed the project to the Chengdu city government cultural agencies, whereupon they received funding for these projects. In this case, although the artists and artworks are selected by actors whose cultural priorities may not be aligned with New Silk Road domestic and international development, the Chengdu Biennale has been helpful in recent years to Chinese central and local governments in developing political, economic, and cultural projects such as the Twin-Cities project, which focuses on Chengdu and nearby Chongqing as forming a hub for China's New Silk Road development westward into Afro-Eurasia.

3.3 Grassroots Supplementary P2P

The Bookworm International Literary Festival, then, is an example of grassroots supplementary P2P connectivity. This literary festival, also conceived of by Peter Goff and curated by UK expat Catherine Platt, hosted writers from all over the world in Beijing, Suzhou, and Chengdu for workshops and book talks. The festival serves as a good example of cultural programming that arose in a dearth of Southwest China arts and culture infrastructure. Funded by various foreign embassies, international schools, and other domestic and international actors, the programming enjoyed unprecedented freedom, and the degree of diversity among both Chinese and international writers and artists present at the festivals was highly inclusive.

Another excellent example of grassroots P2P is the Chengdu International Performance Art Festival, organized by performance artist Zhou Bin and other members of the Chengdu-based 719 Artists Alliance and other avant-garde curatorial entities operating in Chengdu. This festival, which began in 2008 and will see its next iteration in October 2024, is conceived by local artists and curators, hosting artists from

countries throughout the world. Performances are held in a combination of sites throughout Chengdu's fine arts sector, museums, and universities. The artists have enjoyed a relatively high degree of freedom, barring nudity and violence. Up-On festivals receive their greatest support in the form of grants from the Chengdu A4 Art Museum, which gives upwards of 70,000 RMB (just under USD $10,000) annually to defray travel and materials costs for festival participants and artworks. A4 Art Museum's funding comes from real-estate developers who appreciate the value of cultural programming as a draw for creatives and wealth creators to the Luxelakes International Ecological City, on which one campus of the museum is built. Both the public and private sector see the value of funding arts infrastructure, by bringing high-value chain human resource capital to Chengdu and building wealth in the region. A4 Art Museum, a private sector museum, supports diverse cultural messaging and is highly inclusive, as is seen in its late-2019/2020 survey of Southwest China performance art, curated by well-known Chengdu-based curator Lan Qingwei. Lan Qingwei, in turn, is a student of renowned Chengdu-based Lu Peng, one of the forerunners of China's grassroots supplementary contemporary art programming who took contemporary Chinese art to the international art market in the early 1990s with the Guangzhou Biennale, a biennale operating on a new-to-China business model of private investment in the biennale by patrons who would receive artworks in return—artworks whose values would be discovered and built by the international biennale itself. It is important to note that grassroots P2P cannot necessarily be identified as part of the New Silk Roads people-to-people pillar, as nothing can be identified as such unless it is publicly funded. However, I want to suggest that the ultimate goal of New Silk Roads P2P is to create cultural exchanges with foreign audiences, and these programs go a long way toward achieving this goal. While Chinese authorities do not fund these projects, they are aware of them, they issue permits for them, and they turn an occasional blind eye to "culturally questionable material" presented as part of this programming.

3.4 Creating a New Category—Combinant P2P

So far, we have talked about government-conceived and -funded P2P programming, and we have seen that this is largely what we're talking about when we discuss New Silk Road people-to-people connectivity. The cultural programs that are implemented in Pakistan, Kenya, or Latin America work closely in tandem with the policy, infrastructure, trade, and finance of the New Silk Road's other four pillars in those regions. But what if it weren't that way? What if we were to see something like the EU–China literary festival, conceived and implemented by Peter Goff and his network of bookstore and café owners, but also like the

Bookworm Literary Festival in that there was a high degree of freedom to either say supportive or critically constructive things about Chinese culture? What if China were to put more cultural "boots" on the ground and get to know a target foreign public's culture inside and out, getting to know the social, economic, and political issues being discussed in that culture while also coming to know who the influencers and gatekeepers of that culture were? What if China were then willing to spend large sums of money on introducing Chinese culture into a dialogue with the local culture in ways conceived of by local actors, paying local creative and service sector workers to implement the programming? This combinant form of P2P may be more effective than top-down complementary or even grassroots supplementary P2P at influencing foreign publics. I have developed a proposed model of what this might look like. This is purely conjecture: it doesn't exist, and I have no evidence that it would work or what problems its implementation might discover. I merely develop it as a possibility for the case of illustration.

Proposed Combinant P2P outside of China: Rey Tehran, Iran

The 2019 Silk Cities conference hosted over 100 participants and 76 presentations, representing geographic areas as widespread as Chile, Cyprus, Guatemala, Haiti, India, Iran, Iraq, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, Libya, Mexico, New Zealand, Pakistan, Peru, Spain, Syria, Vietnam, the UK, and the US.[7] Silk Cities is "an independent and bottom-up initiative" which provides urban profiles in the form of "Circles of Sustainability" (Arefian, Hossein, and Moeni 2020). These "circles" are infographics that divide a circle into four quadrants, which evaluate a city's economics (production and resourcing, exchange and transfer, accounting and regulation, consumption and use, labor and welfare, technology and infrastructure, as well as wealth and distribution); politics (organization and governance, law and justice, communication and movement, representation and negotiation, security and accord, dialogue and recognition, ethics and accountability); ecology (materials and energy, water and air, flora and fauna, habitat and land, place and space, constructions and settlements, emission and waste); and culture (engagement and identity, performance and creativity, memory and projection, belief and meaning, gender and generations, enquiry and learning, wellbeing and health). It is also "an independent professional and academic initiative for contextual knowledge exchange, research and advocacy."[8]

7 http://silk-cities.org/2019-post-conference, "Silk Cities 2019: Reconstruction, Recovery and Resilience of Historic Cities and Societies" (accessed 31 Mar. 2021).

8 https://silk-cities.org/about-silk-cities-2 (accessed 31 Mar. 2021).

Examining Tehran's Circle of Sustainability profile, one can see that there are ecological areas which are in highly unsatisfactory or critical condition. Tehran's best marks are in the culture category, indicating a wealth of creative capital and resources. This cultural capital could be used to diversify Tehran's economy, helping to overcome some of its challenges in the ecological quadrant. Let us look at some cultural history of Rey Tehran, as well as its importance in China's trade connectivity in the region, before suggesting how China's support of Rey Tehran's cultural heritage and creative sector could be mutually beneficial for Iranian and Chinese cultures. I will suggest how a combinant model of P2P as part of its New Silk Road development in the region could help Iran to diversify its economy while opening Iranian publics to learning more about Chinese culture.

Ancient Rey

One of the main strongholds of the Seleucid Empire, Rey (also spelled Rayy), Iran is a very old political and cultural base of Ancient Persia. Rey has since been incorporated into the greater urban area of Tehran, Iran. Today it is the southeasternmost of 20 districts in Tehran. It suffered much during the invasions of Arabs, Mongols, and Turks. Important cultural relics include the Neolithic ruins at Chehme-Ali, the Rey Castle, and the Rashkan Castle, the latter of which was built during the Parthian era. Rey was culturally vibrant, with merchants, scholars, and poets being recorded in historical texts as having been associated with the city. In an older incarnation, the city was known as Rhages and was a sacred site for the almighty Ahura Mazda of the Zoroastrian faith. The city is situated between the Caspian Sea in the north and the Persian Gulf in the south, such that all trade traveling east–west contributed to the wealth of Rey. In the 1930s, archaeologist Eric Schmidt excavated the site of Rey. This is fortunate, as much of the area has been leveled by real estate developers in Tehran's suburban expansion from its own city center.[9]

Rey Tehran Material Exchanges with China Today

Iran's Chabahar Port is part of China's "String of Pearls" threatening to encircle India. Besides Chabahar, other "pearls" include the South China Sea, Malacca, Lombok, and Hormuz. Also part of this strategy is China-owned Gwadar Port in Pakistan, as an important logistical hub in the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor. This corridor is vital to overcoming the Malacca dilemma being exacerbated recently

9 https://oi.uchicago.edu/museum-exhibits/special-exhibits/daily-life-ornamented-medieval-persian-city-rayy (accessed 14 Oct. 2020).

by the Quad (US, Australia, Japan, and India). If the Strait of Malacca were made impassable for Chinese shipping, this would pose an energy security risk for China by threatening trade routes (Aslan and Rashid 2020). In the meantime, India prefers to commence its North–South overland route from Chabahar Port, preferring it to Karachi in Pakistan for the closer distance of 800 kilometers. There is also competition for rare earth metals to be found in Afghanistan, a market China dominates at the moment; another reason for CPEC achieving advanced stages in not only energy, infrastructure, and security, but also in socio-economic programs. China's relations with Tehran are important for not only North–South but also East–West transit into the Caucasus, Turkey, and Central and Eastern Europe. I suggest that China's relationship with Iran could benefit the New Silk Roads not merely through maneuvering trade connectivity or infrastructure but by developing common cultural goals in the region, fostered by benevolent programming there. The costs of hard power, such as policy, economics, and military engagement, could be mitigated through expenditures in cultural power, through combinant P2P programming.

My Proposal: Rey Tehran P2P Cultural Exchanges with China

Today, there is a movement to preserve the city of Tehran's over 200 qanats dating back seven hundred years. A case is being made to repair and maintain the oldest, Mehgerd, by defining a conservation framework based on UNESCO's 2011 Recommendation on Historic Urban Landscapes (HUL) (Zivar and Karimian 2020). Shiraz, nearly ten hours to the south of Rey Tehran, contains well-developed cultural heritage and tourism infrastructure, with boutique hotels in the Sang-e Siah historical district. Regeneration of historical districts in Iranian cities faces large swathes of urban decay due in part to real-estate boom structures left empty in failing districts and communities (Zadeh 2020).

As China eases Iran away from India into more substantive Belt and Road planning and implementation, it could focus on fifth-pillar people-to-people connectivity. Research has shown how Iran struggles with its urban regeneration and cultural heritage preservation. In helping Tehran to vitalize its historical centers, China could foster the growth of not only heavy industrial parks but also creative clusters and tech incubation investment areas near cultural heritage sites. Public goods in the way of vocational training and educational exchange could ameliorate pressures in Iran while also creating opportunities to demonstrate Chinese cultural values and ideals in a way that encourages grassroots engagement.

UNESCO is on the table for funding Tehran's creative economic sector; this will help the oil-dependent economy to diversify its portfolio. China can also participate by encouraging or providing incentives for entrepreneurs from the private sector, either from China or incubated in Iran to participate in the building of Iran's

political, economic, and cultural capital. According to a research report out of Tehran (2013), its creative sector is concerned with establishing and diversifying educational centers, accredited universities, professors of universities, technology and information production, theatre halls, cinemas, music halls, traditional and modern art galleries, and museums (Gharagozlo 2013). This report also mentions the nine areas in which private entrepreneurs could partner with domestic and international institutions to fulfil common goals in building a creative city: attraction and maintenance of a creative class; constructing cultural buildings and monuments; cinemas, theaters, galleries, art studios, museums, and concert halls revitalizing urban areas by bringing in foot traffic and spatially defining spaces for a cultural demographic of "creatives"; promoting cultural tourism; calculating the economic benefits of art; thinking about the role of art in global branding of a city; and creating creative industries where there are none. The report gives more specific sectors: architecture, advertising, art and antique markets, crafts, fashion design, film and video, recreation software, music, dramatic arts, publishing, computer game software, and televisions. Its author points out that Tehran is exhibiting signs of what Richard Florida defines as a "creative city," with festivals and fairs celebrating cultural heritage as well as contemporary science and technology (Florida 2004, Gharagozlo 2013).

Let us recall what was said above about the cultural quadrant of Tehran's Circle of Sustainability. Let us imagine Iranian creative entrepreneurs working in small and medium-sized enterprises (SME), receiving Chinese government investments aimed to up-level Tehran's workforce value by diversifying Iran's economy, shifting away from oil dependency and towards a creative and services-based economy. In the examples given above of the Chengdu Up-On International Performance Art Festival and the Bookworm Literary Festival, there was enormous local and international support. In this case, we saw Chinese artists and writers leading interaction with other cultures, engaging in questions of cultural identity, performativity, creativity, memory, belief, meaning, gender, history, and learning. Imagine how much more this grassroots supplementary P2P could achieve if it had federal funding without ideological strings attached (thus transforming into combinant P2P). This is what I propose as the best way forward for China in developing New Silk Roads people-to-people connectivity.

4 Conclusion

I suggest that Chinese government actors responsible for allocating funding for P2P projects in Iran could consider spending less money on programming that teaches foreign audiences about itself (such as Chinese opera performances, Chinese traditional medicine schools, and media channels promoting Chinese

culture) and more money researching the needs I have outlined above concerning Tehran, to preserve its cultural heritage and to develop its creative and cultural sectors. I suggest that this could result in a more favorable view of Chinese presence in the region, culturally, economically, and politically. Top-down complementary P2P is easier to control, but it runs the risk of being shut down psychologically by foreign audiences who are unwilling or unable to do the "aesthetic footwork" needed to accept, understand, or be interested in Chinese culture. Many non-Chinese audiences require a degree of criticality that is absent in some top-down P2P cultural programming, which tends to be performative in its ultra-favorable presentation of its own value. Combinant P2P would be more difficult to control due its contributions from private individuals and organizations, both in conceiving and implementing the cultural programs. There would, however, be a critical feedback loop, whereby foreign publics would more willingly learn about Chinese culture, and Chinese government funding bodies would learn about how foreign publics view and interact with Chinese culture, which would also teach Chinese actors a good deal about the target culture, forming what we could identify as authentic international cultural exchange. This international closeness on a grassroots level could foster an amicability between the publics of China and its NSR partner nations, which could go so far as to exert an upward influence upon the leaders of these regions, thus facilitating, expediting, and sustaining the other four pillars of the New Silk Roads.

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Chapter 2

The Role of Art in (De)constructing Silk Road Narratives[1]

Jamila Adeli

In this paper, I use the lens of art and artistic practices assuming that the processes and results of art production, also referred as the epistemic function of art (Holert 2020), are a means of (trans)local and (trans)regional knowledge production. Contemporary art and artistic practice, such as exhibition-making, especially need to be included when investigating local reactions to large-scale infrastructures that are shaping pasts, realities, and futures at various scales.

To understand how artists and other cultural actors increasingly contribute to the (de)construction of local and (trans)regional narratives, experiences, and imaginations, I pose the following three research questions: what is the function of art and artistic practices in constructing and deconstructing narratives that aim to create or contest the transformation of new regional orders? How can we use art and artistic practices to understand transregionalization and its different dimensions? What related knowledge is produced by artworks and exhibitions, and how is it aesthetically perceived?

1 I would like to thank my reviewers for their highly valuable comments and criticism.

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Audio-Feature "Mehr als Schienen und Straßen: Kulturelle Begegnungen entlang Chinas Neuer Seidenstraße." by Susanne Balthasar (in German) featuring the research of Sophia Kidd (chapter 1), Jamila Adeli (chapter 2) and Linda Ammann (chapter 6).

Jamila Adeli, The Role of Art in (De)constructing Silk Road Narratives. In: Jamila Adeli and Linda Ammann (eds.), New Silk Road Narratives: Local Perspectives on Chinese Presence along the Belt and Road Initiative. Heidelberg: Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing, 2024, pp. 53–98. https://doi.org/10.11588/hasp.1370.c19720

A suitable research object to tackle these questions is the field of cultural politics that is slowly unfolding as a significant state agency in domestic China and its international relations concerning its Belt and Road Initiative. Here, the above mentioned questioned can be narrowed down to the following: What is the role of art and artistic practices in strategic cultural politics, especially in processes of transregionalization we encounter in the current China-led infrastructure-building that is working towards a possible transformation into a new geocultural region—a culturally and economically networked Eurasia and Africa? What narratives emerge and dissolve alongside the construction of the China-led BRI? How do contemporary artists and curators reflect, react to, and interact with the BRI, its cultural politics, and both shared and common cultural heritage?

The artworks and artistic practices I engage with are examples of Chinese cultural heritage, contemporary art, and the artistic practice of exhibition-making in state museums in mainland China. Musealization and the development of cultural industries are manifestations of the infrastructural shift that characterizes the globalizing art field, including the art field in China. Since the Reform and Opening Up of China in 1978, scholars have been witnessing a heightened effort to scan the Chinese past and material culture for museum objects that are contextualized into the museal field (cf. Desvallées and Mairesse 2010) and to culturally and artistically connect to the world, more precisely, to the international art field. This effort is largely connected to a new cultural policy that turned its focus to museum development (Bollo and Zhang 2017) with a new Mid- to Long-Term Museum Development Plan (2011–2020). The plan "intends to open one museum per area of 250,000 inhabitants in order to cover the maximum population in terms of cultural offer, hosting 30,000 temporary exhibitions and attracting one billion visitors annually by 2020." (Bollo and Zhang 2017: 29). The museum development plan refers to both state and private museums and has laid emphasis on an international appeal and outreach, thereby spurring interest among scholars of Chinese culture, sociology, and museology (Denton 2014, Lu 2014, Varutti 2014).

One of the main reasons for this trend is the specific role of museums in China, especially since Xi Jinping introduced both the Chinese Dream as a new domestic ideology and the Belt and Road Initiative as its implementation tool for connecting with the new Silk Road Regions at various levels and with various actors. In contemporary China, museums are increasingly regarded as a "basis for patriotic education" through the "commemoration and celebration of Chinese history (Bollo and Zhang 2017: 28). Museums, with their (inter)national and local exhibitions, are "required to adapt to the needs of the dynamic market economy, alongside a reconceptualization of cultural heritage values" (Bollo and Zhang 2017: 31). They are state-acknowledged sites and spaces of cultural identity formation

and state ideological assertion (Lu 2014) and, hence, an apt platform to promote the idea of the BRI as one further step within the national rejuvenation of China.

Within the context of the Chinese Dream and the BRI, narratives emerge for both domestic and foreign audiences that increasingly stress the relevance of culture for the success of both the Chinese Dream and the BRI, outlining cultural politics and people-to-people connectivity as a major pillar of the Chinese central government (for further details, see Adeli and Ammann in this volume). This is no surprise, as the recent history of the roles of art in China points towards an infrastructural integration of art, especially contemporary art, into Chinese society: visible, appealing, and connectible with the international art field. Art, in China and elsewhere, is an "excellent means of participating in international contemporary life; it is a means of bringing the world together in a way that is different from politics and economics" (de Nigris 2016). Nevertheless, in being capable of constructing, deconstructing, and conceiving communication about being in the world, art, and—in the broader sense—culture, it is at the same time an important element of diplomacy and is used by governments to interact with their domestic citizens and in international relations. Definitions of cultural diplomacy are vast and varied; for the purpose of my arguments, I align with David Clarke, who defines it as a "policy field, in which states seek to mobilize their cultural resources to achieve foreign policy goals" (Clarke 2020: 1).

1 Art and Narratives: Constructing and Critically Reflecting New Silk Road Realities

Art has a variety of roles and functions: it can be a decorative or aesthetic object, a signifier of identity and power, a political comment, a mirror of a society, or a practice and means of knowledge production. From an art sociological perspective, artworks are means of communication and a medium of observing, reflecting, and criticizing the world and circumstances we live in, produced by individuals of societies to communicate with and reflect upon societies (Becker 1982, Luhmann 1995, Bourdieu 1999). In this reading, artworks are sites, archives, and spaces of knowledge; and of knowledge production, dissemination, and storage. They reflect relations between humans, realities, and the world in an aesthetic, mostly visual and often enigmatic way. In doing so, they constitute a space in which we are asked to critically rethink a phenomenon, to zoom in on a conflict, or to enter a new realm that is sometimes out of our comfort zone. Hence, the production of art and art-related events like exhibitions are a means of (trans)local and (trans)regional knowledge production. Art is, furthermore, a site whence narratives emerge or where they can be embedded; hence, a space where narratives are both constructed

and deconstructed, communicated, and reflected. Against this reading, artists and other art actors, such as curators or museum directors, willingly and unwillingly contribute to the (de)construction of local and (trans)regional narratives, experiences, and imaginations. Based on the fact that the implementation of the BRI in Silk Road regions is dependent on successful people-to-people connections (Kidd 2022, Adeli and Ammann in this volume), the field of cultural politics, including that of cultural heritage, becomes an increasingly significant strategic field for Chinese domestic and international relations.

Artworks with a political dimension (Mouffe 2001) engage with the moments of such encounters and negotiations, as they often depict and comment on the transformation of social and political realities. Some of the artworks and cultural practices I refer to in this paper do belong to the category of art that has a decidedly political dimension (Section 5), whereas others are instrumentalized as a means to underline a political, ideological, and structural agenda (Sections 2, 3, and 4). Artworks with a decidedly political dimension often work against political or social narratives and thereby create critical and unmasking counternarratives. Artworks that are used by political or private actors to support a political or ideological agenda are either fed into a narrative that serves that purpose or contain elements of the narrative that is meant to be communicated visually, thereby forming a visual narrative that accompanies the textual or oral narrative. Thus, artworks either contain, create, or constitute narratives and counternarratives.

As outlined elsewhere (Adeli and Ammann in this volume), I consider narratives as drivers of transformation and transregional developers, especially in the context of larger meta-processes like globalization or the multilateral co-construction of the BRI. Narratives are produced and communicated by different actors for different purposes in the field: by state and governmental actors on a bilateral axis to negotiate the actual project; by media actors that comment on planned and established projects; and by individual actors like activists that react against the transformation of their realities on the ground. Artworks, with or without a political dimension, can be fed into narratives or produce them themselves, either as affirmation or as contestation. The overlap between art and narratives results in the construction and deconstruction of the perceptions of social and political realities, an ability that evolves into a highly effective means of political politics due to its mobile and aesthetic format and configuration, and its supposedly harmless—because artistic—observation of or commentary on current processes of transformation.

In recent years, however, due to the re-emergence of the discipline of art sociology, especially in German-speaking countries, artworks have been increasingly considered and acknowledged as forms of knowledge production, invalidating the notion of art as a merely aesthetic medium. As art historian Tom Holert (2020) argues, art has the capacity to act epistemically. Holert not only highlights art as

epistemic activity but also problematizes art's capacity to produce knowledge in a world that has become not only multicentric but increasingly conscious about asymmetrical power relations and post-empire (Brubaker and Cooper 2023) dynamics. Contemporary art—and here I highlight the crucial practice of exhibition-making—is deeply involved in (de)constructing narratives in the fields of post-coloniality, post-migration, post-Westernization, and South–South cooperation.

Art as a means of knowledge production has also been acknowledged from the perspective of the theory of art: artistic research refines the capacity of art as epistemic knowledge production (Haarmann 2019). Artistic research can be understood as the visualization and so-called comprehensibility (Badura et al. 2015) of the insight that has emerged from the artistic process (cf. Haarmann 2019: 28). Understanding the analytical field of artistic research as a reflective practice, artworks have the capacity to act as a methodological approach to generate insights into patterns of thinking, perceiving, and acting.[2] Thus, I argue that artworks generate, reflect, and challenge narratives. It is this specific relation of artworks and narratives that I suggest may open a new perspective with regards to mapping the emotional architecture of the BRI in New Silk Road regions via engagement with art. Artworks and art-related practices are both carriers and producers of BRI-related narratives, serving different roles in them, ranging from state propaganda to inner-Chinese regional developers and critical observers of assumed neocolonial practices.

In this paper, I refer to exhibition making as an artistic practice which is deeply tied to the (de)construction of narratives and hence have the power to critique, reflect or constitute certain perspectives and approaches to constructions of realities. The selected exhibition examples are museum exhibitions that address the public. Hence, the context of the displayed narratives makes them even more powerful as museums are decisive state and private actors in societies:

> Museums are key players in constructing meaning, asserting individual and collective identities, and institutionalizing heritage. They also act as catalyzers in civil society and contribute to envisioning possible futures. As such, the narratives they put forward have a significant impact on how a particular society presents itself, perceives itself, and projects itself into the future. (Sitzia 2023: 154)

In the following, I provide an overview of examples of artistic practices that demonstrate two different roles of art in the context of the China-led Silk Road narratives: in Sections 2, 3, and 4, cultural heritage, exhibition-making, and the

2 Of course, not every work of art is artistic research and produces knowledge.

positioning of a museum serve as research objects that are analyzed to understand their functions for BRI and Silk Road narratives. In Section 5, three selected works of artist Musquiqui Chihying are introduced to demonstrate art with a political dimension that creates a critical counternarrative to the Chinese Dream and BRI-related narratives.

2 Heritage Diplomacy: Demonstrating State Power through Art

Since cultural heritage has entered discussions on contested present and future geopolitical and geocultural arenas like the rise of the BRICS countries and, thus, the Global South or the recent China-led BRI, heritage matters have been increasingly politicized and evolved into a field of negotiating regional and local notions of belonging, meaning, identity construction, and cultural values (Mozaffari 2020, Čeginskas and Lähdesmäki 2023). Cultural heritage is understood as an "essential element in transmitting values, establishing narratives of historical and contemporary connectivity, and creating subjective and collective identities and a feeling of belonging" (Čeginskas and Lähdesmäki 2023: 1). As a political and diplomatic tool that is activated in a state's agenda, heritage diplomacy—with regards to heritage *as* diplomacy (Winter 2015)—aims to facilitate cultural cooperation and mutual cultural understanding between different multilateral actors. In this reading, the emphasis lies on people-to-people connectivity and what can be built through it in the present and future.

To tackle the relevance of cultural heritage and its use in cultural politics, I find it helpful to work with the notion of historical statecraft that Maximillian Mayer (2018) has introduced to the discourse on the BRI. Historical statecraft describes the phenomenon of Chinese leadership to increasingly use selective representations of the past to legitimize policy and both construct and reinforce national self-identities: "The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) emphasizes the glory of imperial dynasties, the country's cultural heritage and its philosophical traditions to convey a sense that China has rightfully returned to center stage in world politics" (Mayer 2018: 1217). Since the communication of BRI- and Chinese-Dream-related narratives, historical statecraft has developed into a phenomenon that unfolds its potential especially in relation to cultural heritage matters within and outside China. The thus heightened emphasis and glorification of China's cultural hegemony seems to serve the purpose of legitimizing a specific political agenda and of actively shaping present cultural and national identities.

Here, the art of conducting state affairs by the use of culture can be described with heritage diplomacy, a contested field which has gained serious attention since the recent rise of the restitution debates between former colonial and postcolonial

countries: "Heritage diplomacy is often connected to geopolitical and economic power in international relations, to identity- and nation-building processes on both the internal and global stage, and to states seeking reconciliation, peace, and transitional justice after conflict" (Čeginskas and Lähdesmäki 2023: 2).

It doesn't come as a surprise that with the communication on the BRI and the Chinese Dream as domestic and foreign politics, the Chinese government has attached the values of tolerance, harmony, peace, and intercultural dialogue (Winter 2022) to the concept of heritage diplomacy. It is exactly these values that Xi Jinping has framed his Belt and Road Initiative with, defining it as a new Silk Road, thereby reviving the notion of the Ancient Silk Road where pasts have been culturally and economically connected. According to Winter, the BRI is the geocultural imaginary of connected pasts, not merely connected by roads but by "a heritage of shared values – harmony, dialogue, mutual respect – around which prosperous shared futures, even a 'shared destiny' can be built" (Winter 2023: 133).

One example of how the Chinese government—even several years before the official announcement of the BRI—has been wielding its new soft power as heritage diplomacy (as described above) is the incident of a Christie's art auction of Chinese cultural heritage in Paris in 2009.[3] This example demonstrates the interrelatedness and use of heritage diplomacy and historical statecraft. On 25 February 2009, two bronze animal heads of the 18th century, originating from statues of the ancient Summer Palace of the Qing Dynasty in Beijing, were auctioned by Christie's in Paris. They belonged to the private estate of collector Yves Saint Laurent and his partner Pierre Bergé but were clearly defined as cultural heritage[4] looted by British and French troops in 1860 and brought out of China to Europe. Prior to the auction, when the nature of the artifacts was made public, the Chinese government fought to block the auction, as the bronze heads are state-owned and their auction has been considered a further humiliation by the French—a humiliation of China by European colonial forces that started in the mid-1850s and continued for roughly one hundred years. China's State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH) condemned the bronzes' sale and said it would have "serious effects" on Christie's interests in China. SACH attempted to put a halt to the sale by several means, including filing a suit against Christie's. The auction house won and sold

3 In a conversation with Jamila Adeli in this book, art journalist Minh An Szabó de Bucs tells the story of the famous auction at Christie's in detail and contextualizes it in the context of contemporary Chinese museum policy, demonstrating China's presently awakening cultural politics.

4 The heads are the rat and the hare, and they belonged to a series of 12 Chinese zodiac animals formerly adorning a water fountain in the European part of the palace.

the bronze heads to an anonymous telephone bidder for 31.49 million euros. The person refused to pay, on behalf of China and its newly restituted cultural heritage, and identified himself in a press conference held in Beijing as Cai Mingchao, Chinese collector and businessman from Southern China. As was revealed later on, Cai Mingchao was also an advisor to the National Treasures Fund, a government-affiliated NGO founded in 2005 to return looted cultural artifacts to the Chinese government. In 2013, four years after the spectacular auction and bilateral negotiations, both the animal heads were officially restituted by the state of France and have been in the National Museum of Art in Beijing since then.

This incident has had political reverberations both within and outside China. For domestic audiences, the repatriation of the cultural heritage has been celebrated as a national event and denotes one step forward on the path of national rejuvenation. For foreign audiences, the incident demonstrates how China deals with looted art: instead of initiating restitution claims towards former colonial forces like France or Germany, the Chinese government collaborates with private actors and acts through the back door to bring back its cultural heritage. Out of 12 bronze heads, seven have been returned since the looting of the ancient Summer Palace. Almost unnoticed by the West, the Chinese government has been surveilling and scanning the global art market for the past 15 years for their cultural heritage. The rather subtle but powerful coup by the Chinese government during the contested Christie's auction demonstrates the newly awakening and strong cultural self-esteem by state and individual actors in China. It exemplifies how heritage diplomacy has evolved as an implementation tool of the Chinese Dream.

As a concept, the Chinese Dream addresses the Chinese people, promoting the re-claim of a strong and homogeneous Chinese national identity after the "century of national humiliation" by former Western empires such as Great Britain, France, Germany, and Japan. The re-formation of a national Chinese identity draws on the ideas of national identity (a projection site for common values and ideas of living together), a dominant homogeneous national ethnicity, and, to some extent, the rejection of Western values. The trick played at the Christie's art auction demonstrates the newly awakened power of the state in the field of culture: it not only unmasks the absurdity in recent discourses on cultural heritage restitution, with the Chinese state (through the hand of Chinese private collectors) "buying back" looted cultural heritage from former colonial suppressor France, but can also be read as a deliberate act against current Western restitution practices, where former colonial suppressors still try to negotiate in their own favor via the arts and culture (Savoy 2021).

The example of the auction of Chinese cultural heritage demonstrates how important the field of culture and heritage diplomacy is for China. It positions itself as a colonized nation that is currently re-emerging as a global power and publicly fighting asymmetrical power relations with the West.

3 Depoliticizing the BRI through Art: Spectacle of Integration at the National Art Museum of China

Another example of how the Chinese state is using art and artistic practices in the context of its BRI- and Chinese-Dream-related narratives is national exhibition-making. In September 2023, the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC) in Beijing held an exhibition titled "Spectacle of Integration" (Figs. 1, 2). The museum belongs to the category of state museums that are led by the central government of China, more precisely, by the Ministry of Culture. The Ministry of Culture controls and finances all official art institutions, which are, hence, non-profit and entirely dependent on state funding, and their programming is meant to pursue a social mission for society (cf. de Nigris 2016).

All art that is represented by the National Art Museum of China belongs to the category of "official art," as opposed to "non-official art," which denotes artworks that are not supported by institutions like the Ministry of Culture and, therefore, not part of the officially perceived Chinese public art field (Wu 2010, de Nigris 2016).

The exhibition was organized by the National Art Museum of China in collaboration with the Silk Road International Alliance of Art Museums and Galleries. It celebrated the 10th anniversary of the BRI by presenting 180 artworks ranging from paintings to drawings, prints, and sculptures by artists from 67 different countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, and Oceania. The exhibited artworks belong to the museum and were selected to depict the regional variety and cultural traditions of the countries and regions that participate in the China-led New Silk Road.

The accompanying wall texts of the exhibition introduce the main theme at the exhibition entrance and further group the artworks into geographical regions that are interlinked by BRI projects, with each region displayed in one room. The idea of cultural connectivity is the dominant recurring motif and is strongly emphasized in each section, thereby defining both the museum site and the present exhibition practice as a location and act of transculturality and cultural exchanges: "As a national art gallery tasked with international cultural exchanges, NAMOC, in its active response to the Xi Jinping's initiative, has over the decade participated in the BRI through fine works of art." (NAMOC 2023a).

The context and aim of "Spectacle of Integration" is outlined predominantly as an appraisal of the China-led BRI project. The accompanying wall texts do not explicitly explain the exhibition title but leave space for an interpretation that alludes to the celebration of transcultural and intercultural entanglements. Throughout the exhibition, the BRI is portrayed as a "new path to the cooperation and development of countries worldwide" (NAMOC 2023a), as facilitator of the idea of a "community with a shared future for mankind," and as benevolent to "more

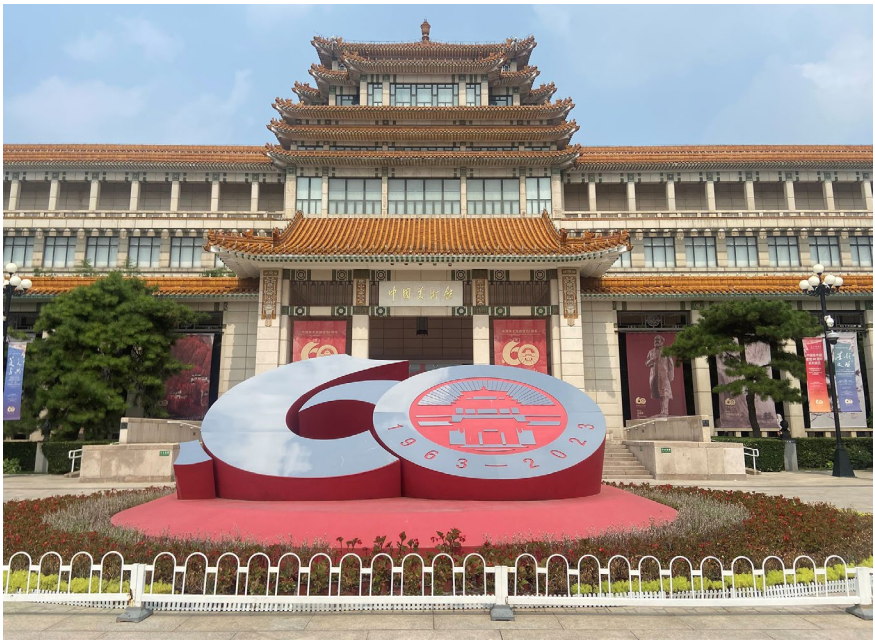

Fig. 1 National Art Museum of China, Beijing, Sept. 2023

than 100 countries." The artworks are described not only as visualizations of the specific artistic character of a region but as the embodiment of mutual respect for their "tolerance and respect for different cultures and their attention to and thinking about the destiny of mankind" (NAMOC 2023a). They are further regarded as the "epitome of the Silk Road spirit of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and reciprocal benefit" (NAMOC 2023a). The introduction to the exhibition concludes with its aim to "strengthen understanding that the BRI countries have towards one another, add luster to the drive for a community with a shared future for mankind through the beauty of integration as displayed in various art forms" (NAMOC 2023a).

The appraisal of the BRI as a reconnecting infrastructure towards a shared future as the main exhibition theme is based on an extensive referral to the Ancient Silk Road and its transcultural impact on the regions involved. The Ancient Silk Road is described as having "originated on Chinese soil" (NAMOC 2023b) and defined as the consequent forerunner for the contemporary initiative ("it made a comeback centuries later" [NAMOC 2023b]) that is also China-led.

The exhibition wall texts at "Spectacles of Integration" clearly allude to the Ancient Silk Road in the mode of "nostalgia, expressing longing for a perceived time when universalism was a norm" and when "a vast global flow of ideas and

Fig. 2 Exhibition view, Spectacle of Integration, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, Sept. 2023

things permitted adventure, romance and knowledge" (Thorsten 2005: 301). The referring to a rather romanticized common humanity and future neglects the fact that Ancient Silk Road regions have also been experiencing intensive times of plunder, bloodshed, and cultural clashes, so the idea of the Ancient Silk Road as "peaceful co-existence of commerce, creeds, and cultures is a selective memory, and throughout history selective memories have been appropriated toward the absolutism of both contextualism and universalism" (Thorsten 2005: 314).

Indeed, the exhibition organizers are using the works on display to depict a rather abstract and nostalgic idea of a universal humankind that is interconnected via trade but respects its cultural differences, emphasizing a narrative that constitutes a longing for belonging to a global community and providing space for imagining a global future.

In juxtaposing works from different countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa, the works exhibited are meant to present and visualize a specific narrative of the BRI: it is portrayed as the natural successor of the Ancient Silk Roads that emerged as a network of trade—one that is responsible for the transcultural architecture of Eurasia, which, in turn, led to a universal humankind. The exhibition seems to aim to open up a space to imagine a future that harmoniously embraces various regions and their cultures in order to create a harmonious global future for mankind. The

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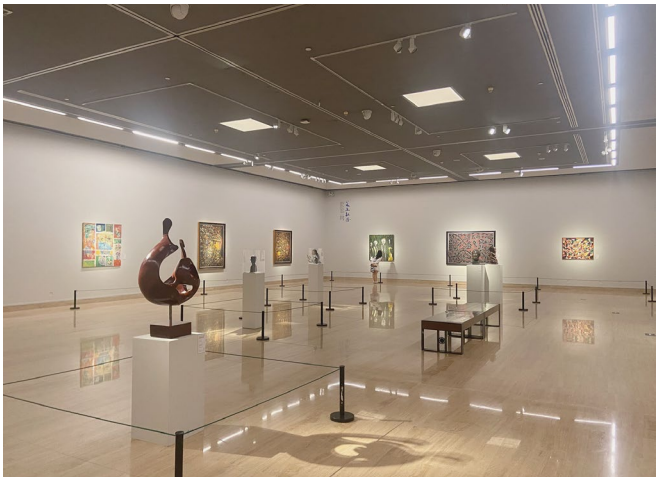

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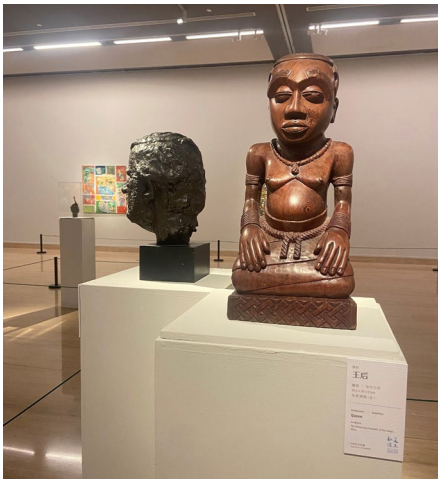

Figs. 3, 5 Exhibition view, Spectacle of Integration, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, Sept. 2023
Fig. 4 Januri, "Many Roads lead to Beijing", 2021 Spectacle of Integration, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, Sept. 2023

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Figs. 6, 7 Zhou Zongkai, "African Dream, Chinese Dream", 2021, Spectacle of Integration, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, Sept. 2023

concept remains vague when translated into the individual geographical sections of the new Silk Road regions. The juxtaposition of the exhibited artworks seems eclectic, the individual works are geographically grouped into Europe, Asia and Africa without any specific reference to the BRI and without further explanation on the thematic or formal connections between individual works (Figs. 3, 4, 5).

Only few works explicitly refer to the thematic framing of the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the BRI and its related narratives. One of the very rare examples is a large-scale oil painting called "African Dream, Chinese Dream" by Zhou Zongkai from 2021 (Figs. 6, 7). It is not only the size of the painting that makes it stand out immediately from the other works of the exhibition but the composition and depiction of its motif: the arrival or departure of a brand-new train amidst cheerful Africans within an African landscape.

The large painting is one of the most frequented pieces of the exhibition. In a front view, it depicts the celebration of a train that appears newly built and is

Fig. 8 Zhou Zongkai, "African Dream, Chinese Dream" (detail), 2021, Spectacle of Integration, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, Sept. 2023

in the center of the canvas below a red construction. The train is surrounded by chanting and dancing Africans in seemingly local or traditional clothing, their clothes' colors referring to the Kenyan flag. The people are positioned right and left of the train in dynamic postures. The background opens up with as a vast and rather empty landscape with flocks of wild life animals, newly built train tracks on the right and an airport-like building on the right. The crowd celebrating the inauguration of the train is painted in photorealistic style at the eye level of the viewer (Figs. 8, 9, 10). The mood of the depicted scene is exuberant; confetti in the air underlines this joyful moment.

The monumental size of the painting and its stark red and brown oil colors with even brushwork create a peculiar scenery, equally intense and alienating. On the one hand, the realistic mode of representation of the Kenyans celebrating creates the illusion of a photographic snapshot. On the other hand, the composition of train, architecture, train tracks, animals, and rainbow that are neatly embedded in a vast and flat landscape appears staged. Whereas some viewers were irritated by the depiction of stereotyped Africans, other—especially Chinese—viewers clearly admired the dynamic, almost ecstatic depiction of the people. These viewers were

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Figs. 9, 10 Zhou Zongkai, "African Dream, Chinese Dream" (detail), 2021, Spectacle of Integration, National Art Museum of China, Beijing, Sept. 2023

often posing and taking pictures in front of the painting, a behavior reminiscent of picture stops at sightseeing sites.

Artist Zhou Zongkai appears to have adapted his motif from a press picture (Fig. 11)[5] that was taken in 2017, seemingly serving as an inspiration for the large canvas. The picture titled "A cargo train sets off on its inaugural journey from Mombasa to Nairobi on the new Chinese-built line" depicts the inauguration of the line. A comparison of press photograph and the canvas suggests that the artist copied the train and the cheering and celebrating crowd of Kenyans as a motif for his artwork. The artwork "African Dream, Chinese Dream" in fact depicts a well-known and Chinese financed and built BRI project in Kenya: the building of a 472-km-long train route between Mombasa and Nairobi, connecting Kenya's largest cities in five hours.

Completed in 2017, the railway project is Kenya's largest infrastructure project since independence in 1963 and an integral part of the BRI, 90 percent of it being financed by Chinese loans and ten percent by the Kenyan government. From a local Kenyan perspective, the train project has been regarded as controversial in terms of its financing and operationalization. At present, the train route ends in the middle of nowhere and not, as expected and planned, in Uganda. The Chinese loans were not renewed, as the Chinese government is not convinced about the project's revenues.

Local resistance against the project has risen since its implementation (Basu and Janiec 2021). Truck drivers in Mombasa have demonstrated against the regulations, as they prohibit the transport of goods via road and oblige their route to be via rails in order to use the newly built train. Once the project was operational, the deep-sea port of Mombasa that was the main site for the clearance of goods was shut down. The Chinese intervention has had considerable destructive effects on the economic situation and the everyday life of coastal dwellers who were dependent on the income and activities that the port had generated (Swaleh 2023).

Not surprisingly, this part of the story around the BRI project has been omitted in the painting. Here, the artist celebrates China's achievement in Kenya. The painting's narrative gesture is clearly one that positions the Chinese (train) as the savior of the Kenyan, or even African, future and Dream. Besides omitting negative effects of the China-funded and -led project, the represented elements and humans in Zhou's painting are reminiscent of a communist style of painting of the 20th century that was used to support or even glorify the socialist ideology and that turned contemporary art into ambassadors and agents of the present

5 Source: https://www.scmp.com/magazines/post-magazine/long-reads/article/2105230/lunatic-express-how-kenyan-colonial-railway (accessed 15 Dec. 2023).

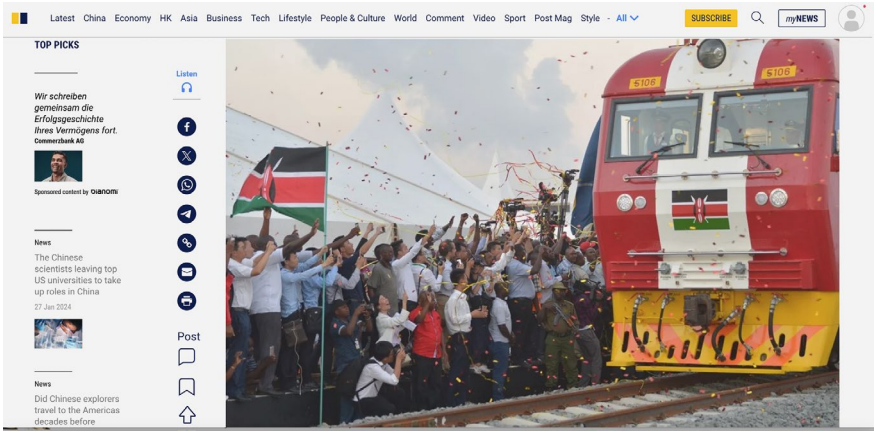

Fig. 11 Screenshot of website, press photo of inauguration of railway project in Kenya 2017

statecraft. BRI projects like the Mombasa–Nairobi railway are considered national events, as they are part of the implementation plan of the Chinese Dream and, thus, facilitate the China-led path to a harmonious mankind and future.

Artist Zhou Zongkai belongs to the group of artists who have been selected for a special governmental training program (cf. China Daily 2019), and his work "African Dream, Chinese Dream" seems to be a direct result of his training. It can be regarded as a recent commission for the museum's collection, aiming to visualize successful Sino-African connectedness and the accomplishments of Xi Jinping's government and Chinese workers in Kenya.

The title of the work underlines such a reading. "African Dream, Chinese Dream" evokes the impression of a balanced "dreaming": a visualization or fulfillment of both African and Chinese visions. Whereas the "Africans" and their "dream" (a new railway) are figuratively present and characterized with joyful ecstasy, the "Chinese Dream" is not pictured directly in the painting. In contrast to the original motif—the photograph of the inauguration on site—there are no Chinese officials present. What is to be perceived from the "Chinese Dream" is the liberating joy of the "Africans," who are not only represented in stereotypes (with their local costumes and instruments and chanting postures) but also with the absence of semantic referral to their ethnic origin as Kenyans. The title further implies that the concept of an "African Dream" has been put over the Mombasa–Nairobi project, assuming that the Chinese Dream would facilitate an African Dream.

Referencing an actual BRI project situated in Kenya and depicting its inauguration in a way that appears like an act of liberation for African people by the

Chinese government clearly places the work not only into the category of "art recording China's achievement" (China Daily 2019), as it was put by a Chinese journalist, but as Socialist Realism. Socialist Realism originated in 1920 in various communist countries in Eastern Europe and spread from the former Soviet Union to Poland, the GDR, Cuba, China, and other communist countries. Its topics are the visualization of socialist values and the socialist approach to developing a society and country, often expressed by the depiction of daily routines of workers in factories or on farms in a heroic and monumental, but realistic, style. In general, the chosen subjects' purpose was to glorify the achievements of socialism and the advantages of the socialist system. Socialist Realism is an important genre of Chinese art in the 20th century, as it was the official and state-approved artistic style during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976).

Since Xi Jinping took office, Socialist Realism seems to be on the rise and, thus, so does the art of state propaganda. According to a press article at China Daily, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism has initiated a national project concerning contemporary art as a document of China's recent achievements in societal, political, and economic matters. In 2016, the government set up a training program for artists to produce "themed, realistic paintings and sculptures that reflect China's social, cultural and economic accomplishments since the last 40 years" (China Daily 2019). Only one year later, in 2017, approximately 140 artists from China were selected as participants in the training program. The program's purpose was to teach contemporary artists to create works in the Socialist Realism style to celebrate past, present, and future national events of Chinese accomplishments in the fields of society, economy, and politics. Against the background of China's art history, it can be argued that this nourishing of what has been described as "official art" (de Nigris 2016) is part of a newly awakening cultural state policy or even political ideology within the framework of the Chinese Dream. The governmental program points not only to the recent reawakening of the state as facilitator, supporter, and legitimizer of art and culture: the topic of the "Spectacle of Integration" and its thematic focus on both the Ancient and the New Silk Road mirror how closely the exhibition programming of the National Museum of Art is aligned with the BRI narrative of art and culture, facilitating people-to-people connectivity and, hence, the co-construction of a shared and harmonious future.

The "Spectacle of Integration" clearly follows a depoliticizing approach to depict the BRI, to praise its concept of respectfully connecting cultures to build a harmonious future in a new geopolitical region that is rich in cultures, and to position China as strong actor within that new geocultural region. In juxtaposing eclectic works with various regional foci that either have belonged to the Ancient Silk Road or belong to the new Silk Road, the National Art Museum of China visually positions itself as facilitator of an assumed new transregional order and

Fig. 12 Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023

shared future. The artwork "Many Roads lead to Beijing", 2021, by Indonesian painter Januri can be regarded as subtle visualization of this claim as it appears to commissioned by the exhibition organizers for the purpose of the jubilee exhibition (Fig. 12). Januri has participated before in exhibitions that highlight the diplomatic relations between Indonesia and China, his figurative works clearly reminiscent of the style of Socialist Realism.

Artworks like the latter and "African Dream, Chinese Dream," are works that depict, glorify and emotionalize the recent accomplishments of China in regards to its geocultural strategies. Especially "African Deam, Chinese Dream" glorifies the achievements of socialism and the advantages of the socialist system and emphasizes a positive narrative of the benefits and win–win situations of BRI projects like the Mombasa–Nairobi railway, which has been financed, designed, and built by the Chinese government and people as part of fulfilling the Chinese Dream. The exhibition demonstrates how contemporary art is both used by the state to both politicize and depoliticize the BRI and regarded as a tool to project a positive narrative concerning China's socialist approach to a powerful position on the global stage.

4 Exhibitions as Regional Developer: Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan

Parallel to the self-positioning of the National Art Museum of China in Beijing as a cultural platform and a site for active people-to-people-connectivity, the Chinese government uses art and institutional art practices to construct narratives and

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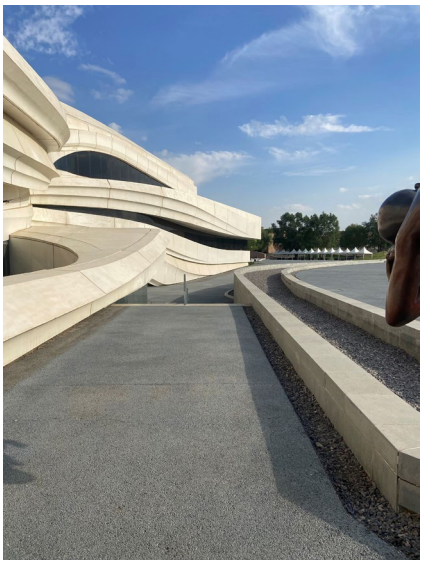

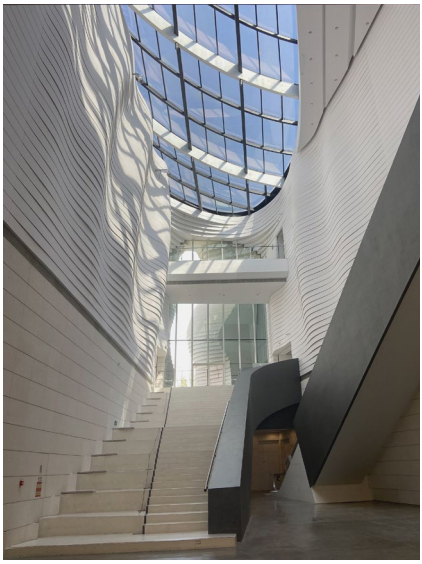

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Figs. 13, 14 Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023

support transregional development that emphasizes culture as an important pillar of regional and people-to-people connectivity. With the example of the private Museum of Contemporary Art in Yinchuan (MoCA Yinchuan), I aim to outline the role of exhibitions and their artworks as a communication tool for regional developing organizations that are supported by the local government, collectors, and curators to intellectually invest into the cultural development of a region that becomes increasingly significant for BRI-related narratives.

The museum is located on the outskirts of Yinchuan, the industrial capital of Ningxia, Hui Autonomous Region, with 1.4 million citizens. Yinchuan has a laid-back, rural, and rather harsh atmosphere and is surrounded by the Gobi Desert, the Yellow River, and the Helan Mountains—an environmental context that frames and influences the feel of the city. It is home to 580,000 people of the Hui minority, who are Muslim Chinese and form a large Muslim minority with rich traditions in Ningxia. The Hui's ancestors are from Persian- and Arab-speaking countries that either share or are close to China's national borders. Ningxia is a scarcely populated area and a poorer region of China, with 85 percent less annual GDP per citizen than Beijing and Shanghai.

After three years of planning and building, MoCA Yinchuan turned out to be a substantial and extraordinary building with stunning architecture (Figs. 12, 13, 14). It opened as the first contemporary art museum in Northwest China in Yinchuan in 2015, with the exhibition "Dimensions of Civilizations," which set

Fig. 15 Artists' Residency Area, Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023

Fig. 16 Outdoor sculpture area, Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023

the tone of the museum's aims and future programming and outreach. MoCA Yinchuan contains three large floors, with six exhibition spaces that add to over 3,000 sqm of overall exhibition space. According to official numbers, the museum attracts 150,000 visitors annually from the region.

The museum area includes a couple of artists' residences (Fig. 15), outdoor sculptures (Fig. 16), and a wetland park (Fig. 17). Both the museum building as well as the immediate soundings were designed by well-known Chinese architects, and the costs were approximately 300 million dollars.

Developed and owned by the Minsheng property group and run by proven art experts, the organizer follows a state-induced and -supported strategy in cooperation with the local government of Yinchuan. From the beginning, the museum was designed to serve one main function: to develop the Ningxia region

Fig. 17 Wetland park, Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023

into an attractive area for potential citizens and investors in terms of business and culture, one of the major pull factors being the recent emphasis of the Ningxia region as the site of China–Arab exchange, similar to the fruitful economic and cultural relations between China and its Arab neighbors and traders during the period of the Ancient Silk Road.

Although Yinchuan is not known to be an internationally appealing contemporary art hub in need of an internationally appealing contemporary art museum that hosts biennales, the developers of the museum repeatedly emphasized the significant role the city has played in intercultural exchange (cf. Biennial Foundation 2016). The press, the museum, and other involved actors that are responsible for the positioning of MoCA Yinchuan highlight Yinchuan as a historic site of the Ancient Silk Road, looking back on a long history of cultural exchange with Asia and the Middle East. When establishing the museum, the Minsheng property group seemed to align its museum-related strategies to the positioning of the China–Arab States Expo, a biennial political and economic event initiated in 2013 with "Friendship, Cooperation and Win–win Development" (China–Arab States Expo, undated) as the guiding theme. Since then, Yinchuan has largely been known for its China–Arab relations, and the region for its historic relevance to the Ancient Silk Road. The event is "an international exposition at national level cosponsored by the Ministry of Commerce of China, China Council for the Promotion of International Trade and the People's Government of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region" (China–Arab State Expo, undated). On its website, the China–Arab States Expo summarizes that, to date, it has "attracted 24 Chinese and foreign dignitaries, 318 Chinese and foreign ministerial-level officials and over 6,000 domestic and foreign enterprises from 112 countries and regions. A total of 1,213 cooperation projects have been signed in areas including modern agriculture, high and new

technology, energy and chemicals, bio-pharmacy, equipment manufacturing, infrastructure, 'Internet plus healthcare' and tourism cooperation" (China–Arab State Expo, undated).

Undoubtedly, it can be considered as the key driver of the past and present region's economy and a successful branding for the city of Yinchuan.

Despite its guidance and support by the local government in providing tax incentives and other benefits to private regional developers, MoCA Yinchuan is a private institution open to the public that has been funded and developed by a private real estate company.[6] The peripheral geographic location, funding scheme, and programming of the museum turns it into an extraordinary, political, and contested space for art and artistic practices. As a domestic and foreign cultural platform, it contains and constructs narratives on geocultural positioning that are in line with Xi Jinping's evocation of the New Silk Road Spirit within the framework of the BRI. Located in the lush wetlands and at the desert border with Gobi, MoCA Yinchuan triggered a controversy in mainland China (Chinnery 2016). The controversy arose not only due to its peripheral location but also due to the thematic orientation of its two prominent collections that needed to fit into the positioning of a museum for contemporary art.

The Ningxia Minsheng Group is a private regional property developer experienced in art-related practices. It developed the museum under a new public–private partnership policy and strategy called BOT (Build–Operate–Transfer)[7]. As a private cultural developer, Minsheng Real Estate has been collaborating with renowned Chinese art actors and local governments. Since 2004, they have been working with Lu Peng, one of China's most influential art curators and art historians. In his function as the deputy director of the Minsheng Group, Lu Peng collaborated with the provincial government to found the museum in Yinchuan and contributed greatly in convincing the city to engage with a private museum project of this size. He was responsible for the curatorial strategy for the permanent collections of the museum. On the one hand, Lu Peng acquired ancient maps by consulting an academic expert, Guo Liang; and on the other hand, he himself formed a collection of early Chinese oil paintings (cf. Chinnery 2016: 6). With

6 For the specific museum policy in China, see the interview with Minh An Szabó de Bucs in this book.

7 The BOT model was introduced in 1980s as a new financing model with private investment that supports the Chinese government in facilitating business infrastructure. BOT limits the involvement of the private sector to building, operating and transferring a publicly funded project and has evolved into the most important factor of China's infrastructure development since its Opening Up policy (cf. Yang, Nisar and Prabhakar 2017).

Fig. 18 Exhibition view, "Visual Adaptation", Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023

its primary focus being a contemporary art museum that presents living artists who work on the region and what is related to Ningxia, the Chinese art field has been puzzled about Lu Peng's choice of permanent museum collections: what are these two collections about, and how are works from the 16th to the 19th century connect to contemporary regional matters?

The permanent collection of ancient maps is presented to the public as a permanent exhibition titled "Outline of the Territory." It comprises 81 world maps from the 16th to the 19th century and is curated and scientifically accompanied by Guo Liang. The aim of the exhibition is to "explore the cultural communication between late Ming dynasty China and Post-Renaissance Europe in the 17th century" (Chinnery 2016: 7). The contextualization of ancient maps as material objects visualizes the communicational dynamics of the encounters between Chinese and European mapmaking and the science behind each cultural approach. The exhibition focuses on the arguments that the "cultural exchange of cartography between China and the West influenced the art of mapmaking in China" (Introduction to the Exhibition), that mapmaking contributed to early globalization, and, further, that art and artistic practices (including cartography) have always been an integral part of cultural and social exchange. At the inauguration of the exhibition, however, curator Guo Liang referred to a recent diplomatic gift (a German-made Chinese map of 1735) from German chancellor Angela Merkel to president Xi Jinping to emphasize the lasting political significance of cartography (cf. Chinnery 2016: 8).

The second permanent exhibition and collection, "Visual Adaptation," is the juxtaposition of 200 early Chinese oil paintings from the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) documenting a period in the early years of globalization when European painters collaborated with Chinese Emperors (Fig. 18). "The Jesuit

Fig. 19 *The Portrait of Emperor Qianlong*, 1756, "Visual Adaptation", Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023

missionaries came to China in the late 16th century, and they made a great impact on modern Chinese history" (Introduction to the Exhibition), not only in the field of cartography but also in the field of oil painting and imperial portraits. The collection's most prominent work, *The Portrait of Emperor Qianlong*, is dated to 1756 and is the core piece of the museum (Fig. 19). Experts have described the painting as functioning as a significant cultural and political turning point in early communication between China and the West (Gong 2014), as the Emperor's attitude towards the European portraits turned out more accepting than historically assumed, shedding new light not only on Chinese art history but also on Emperor Qianlong's encounter with European missionaries. In fact, MoCA Yinchuan sponsored the recent scientific study that revealed that "Qianlong required artists to be faithful in portraying his imperial visage […] and asked them not to neglect the imperfection of his left eyebrow" (Chinnery 2016: 10), which elevated it almost to the level of the Palace Museum, a state-owned and -run museum in Beijing.

With such a famous painting and self-funded academic research in a permanent collection, MoCA Yinchuan reveals a more intense relationship between East and West than has been acknowledged in Chinese art history so far. The early transregional and transcultural encounters between China, Europe, and Islamic countries are further expressed in the programming of the museum concerning contemporary art, which forms the third collection of the museum, presented in changing exhibitions.

The museum predominantly highlights contemporary works by artists who are Chinese or Muslim and work on ethnically, regionally, and locally related topics with a strong ecological focus. A recent example is the exhibition titled "Blowing Rolling Rooting – Migration and Residence of Northwest Artists," which I visited

in September 2023. It displayed 54 works by 26 regional artists from the Northwest of China, their works focusing on the traces, materiality, and trajectory of cultural nomadism that happened in this region (Fig. 20).

The function of MoCA Yinchuan as regional developer is reinforced by its programming and hosting of an international art biennale on site. The Yinchuan Biennale, with extensive collateral programming and international appeal, is another important feature of the museum to exhibit contemporary art and to participate in the global art field, underlining both the museum's international appeal and its relevance for the region. Until now, it has had two editions, each contributing to the Chinese narrative on transregionality and transculturality, thereby focusing on New Silk Road regions, with Islamic countries being at its core. Focal points of both biennales were topics of ecology, sustainability, and cultural encounters. It can be argued that the programming of the museum integrates the BRI narrative of cultural communication and exchange between China, Europe, and Islamic countries, parallel to the topics the China–Eurasia Expo in Yinchuan focuses on.

Parallel to other biennales in the Global South (e.g., the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in India), Yinchuan Biennale positions itself as a cosmopolitan and transcultural site that is presently reviving historic entanglements that go back to the Ancient Silk Roads, especially the land routes that started in the Northwest of China. Staging such large exhibitions, especially in areas with poor artistic infrastructures for modern and contemporary art, can be regarded as another practice of developing the museum and, hence, the region as a cultural platform within the BRI context, clearly emphasizing the narrative of a holistic win–win potential for BRI projects.

Especially with the focus on biennales, MoCA Yinchuan participates in artistic, social, and political discourses of the global art scene. Similar to the National Art Museum of China in Beijing, the recent infrastructural shift in the Chinese art field (including the founding and operation of private museums; the cooperation between state, government, and private actors; and its internationalization) elevated exhibition-making to the level of narrative construction, which turned out to be a fruitful site for the implementation of cultural politics.

Art biennales (similar to business expositions) are decisive in branding regions and cities to gain attention both domestically and internationally. Besides contributing to the global artistic discourse from a site-specific position, biennales are considered a tool for place and city branding (Bydler 2004). As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Adeli 2021), the cities the biennales are located in often develop into tourist destinations that are advertised as unusual or undiscovered (at least, for the art world) but crucial for a specific point in history or the present. The atmosphere and cultural identity of such a city are emphasized on the biennale websites and catalogs and, thus, frame the exhibition with a special prominence and significance

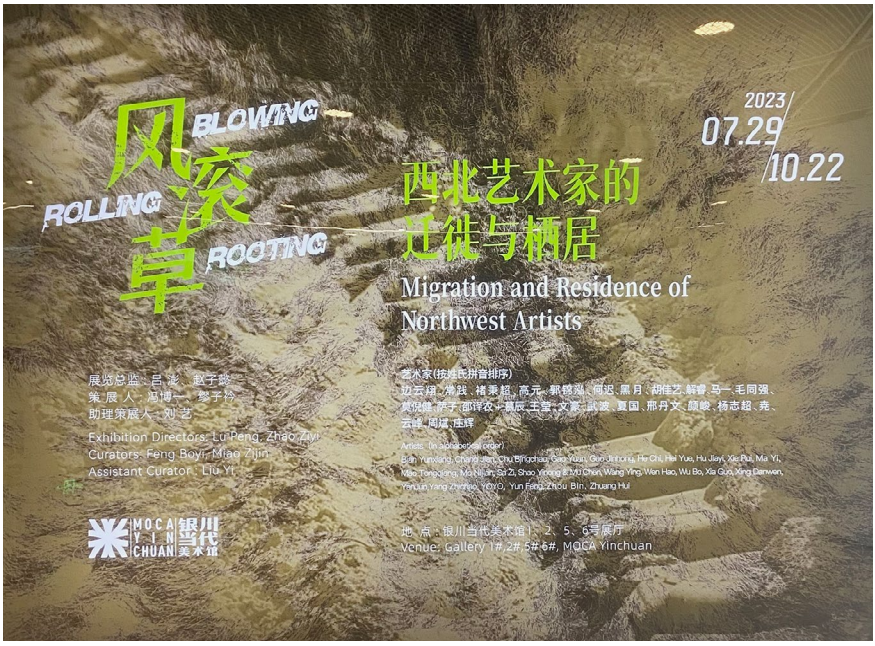

Fig. 20 Exhibition Poster, "Blowing Rolling Rooting - Migration and Residence of Northwest Artists", Museum of Contemporary Art Yinchuan, Sept. 2023

for both the country and a larger narrative. As already analyzed with the example of the two permanent exhibitions of MoCA Yinchuan, the curatorial concept of collections, exhibitions, and biennales is strategically being embedded into the site specificity of a city, be it social, political, aesthetic, or cultural. Thus, the city and region are an essential point of reference for the interpretation and the content of the art event. Consequently, the selection of the host city of a biennale plays a decisive role and is similar to the strategies of city or destination branding as forms of place branding (Anholt 2008).

The spectacular museum architecture that mirrors and comments on the immediate regional ecologic surroundings of MoCA Yinchuan, as well as the spacious artist's residencies around the museum building, not only encourages an artistic infrastructure to develop but also attracts tourism and creative industries and, most importantly, localizes transcultural and transregional phenomena in the art field (Adeli 2021) and beyond.

Hence, by initiating an international biennale at MoCY Yinchuan, the Minsheng Group seemingly aimed to attract creative industries to the region: creative industries—especially when ultra-rich Chinese collectors are involved—are considered an important economic pull factor by Chinese local governments and have been

(at least, to date) warmly welcomed, even financially lured, to develop regions off China's east coast (O'Connor and Gu 2006).

In analyzing the museum's self-positioning, I demonstrate the dynamics of how local Chinese art and art institutions implement the narrative of transculturalization of New Silk Road regions that spread from China via Central Asia to Europe. MoCA Yinchuan has been positioned as a cultural platform that aims to facilitate and reflect on cultural communications between China and Islamic countries, often in relation to old and new Silk Road narratives and their historic and contemporary entanglements. Against that background, I argue that art institutions like the MoCA Yinchuan and their artistic programming can be regarded as decisive drivers of regional development within large-scale infrastructures like the BRI, thus revoking the spirit of the Ancient Silk Road as transculturalizing infrastructure. What has become apparent in Sections 3 and 4 is that exhibitions—especially in the form of biennales—are key in the construction and deconstruction of narratives. The curatorial framing of collections, bienniales, and exhibitions not only visualizes artistic positions but the notions of cities, sites, and states of mind, unfolding local and regional particularities. Thus, exhibition-making not only serves an aesthetic discourse but needs to be considered as a strategic and political cultural practice in contemporary China.

5 Musquiqui Chihying: Contemporary Art as BRI Counternarrative

Contemporary art found its way into the humanities as an increasingly popular research lens to access social, political, economic, and cultural phenomena (Munder and Wuggenig 2012), indicating the rise of art sociology. This development is clearly connected with the structural transformation process of the international art field that experienced the proliferation of biennales and art fairs into more peripheral areas while simultaneously opening up for artistic practices from the Global South. Art—be it contemporary art or cultural heritage—has developed into a multidisciplinary approach to engage with societies of the Global South and their entanglements with the Global North. It evolved into a practice of understanding, commenting on, and reflecting the world. Art and artistic practices have been increasingly used as a source of and access point to understanding certain local actors and their patterns of thought, practice, and perception, thereby contributing to the dissolution of national or regional boundaries. Art outside the discipline of art history can be regarded less from a work-aesthetic and more from a practice-aesthetic approach, i.e., artistic works in the context of social sciences are no longer explored in terms of their result (work) but, rather, in terms of their process of creation (practice). It is less the material or visual result of the artistic

practice the artist focuses on and more the insights that he or she generates in the process of engaging with his or her topic. In this sense art and artistic practice needs to be understood as an adequate and knowledge-generating scientific lens—a lens that I am applying in the following.

Musquiqui Chihying is a Taiwanese artist living between Berlin and Taipei. In the context of this paper, I characterize his work as artistic research that contributes to critical knowledge production. I have selected three artworks that communicate and reflect the artist's observation and opinion on current cultural politics between China, Europe, and Africa. They belong to a series of works with political dimension that focus on cultural heritage, restitution debates, and present Sino-African cultural relations in the context of the BRI. By analyzing Musquiqui's works, I demonstrate how applying the lens of artistic practice helps gain an understanding of present Chinese cultural politics, of the global negotiation of heritage and looted art, and of the new power structures and interdependencies between China and Africa through an aesthetic or visual language.

The first ("The Cultural Center") and second ("The Sculpture") artworks I discuss in this section were produced in 2018 and were exhibited together at the artist's first solo exhibition of the same year, from August until October, in Beijing. Musquiqui's first solo exhibition in China was titled "I'll Be Back" and presented four interconnected artworks. On the occasion of the exhibition, all the works on display were commissioned by the Ullens Center of Contemporary Art (UCCA) and were part of a series of exhibitions at UCCA called "New Directions," which featured emerging artists in China between 2015 and 2019. UCCA was founded in Beijing in 2007 as a private institution by the Belgian couple Guy and Myriam Ullens. The founding of the museum can be regarded as an early stage of the state's cultural policy plan to internationalize the Chinese art field and to strengthen the Chinese cultural identity by facilitating a permanent home for a decidedly "Chinese Art" collection: as Guy and Myriam Ullens failed to find a European venue willing to exhibit their important collection of contemporary Chinese art, the Chinese government gave them the possibility to set foot into the art field of China and used it as a decisive step forward in internationalizing their cultural politics strategy.

The third artwork by Musquiqui Chihying that I will discuss is titled "The Vitrine" and was developed for the exhibition "On the Faience of Your Eyes" at Gallery Liusa Wang in Paris in 2020, also marking the artist's first exposure in Paris and France. The exhibition featured four new multimedia works, mainly in the form of installations that engage critically with the ancient and contemporary museum policy and the presentation of collections in France, predominantly consisting of looted art, of purchases, plunder, or gift. The point of reference for this exhibition was two historic exhibitions of Oriental objects in Paris (Château de Fontainebleau) and Berlin (Akademie der Künste) in 1929. The latter featured over

a thousand objects of art, making it the pioneering exhibition of works from China. The exhibition at Château de Fontainebleau dates back to the 19th century, when art objects from China, Japan, Cambodia, Korea, and Tibet were on display in the Chinese Museum and the salon of Empress Eugenie, both sites belonging to the Château de Fontainebleau. Whether plundered in war, donated, or acquired, these two exhibitions "reflect how others bring their personal or collective imaginations of an elsewhere to the objects on display" (Galerie Liusa Wang 2020). The artworks of the exhibition critically refer to both exhibition practices in Paris and Berlin and create perspectives on and readings of how exotic objects and looted art have been used to identify and construct "the Other" as the subject of the exhibition.

5.1 "The Cultural Center" (2018)

The work "The Cultural Center" (Fig. 21) is a mixed-media installation containing a lightbox table that presents different plates in black and white on a white background. The plates depict different symbols, signs, and photographic excerpts of architectural structures. While some seem immediately familiar, like the logo of the Chinese mobile pay service Alipay (Fig. 22), others need more investigation to understand what they refer to. On top of the table, five silver metal arms are mounted, each holding a golden coin that can be inspected by an attached magnifying lens (Fig. 23).

Fig. 21 Musquiqui Chihying, "The Cultural Center", 2018, exhibition view at *Step Out of the Strange Light*, 2021

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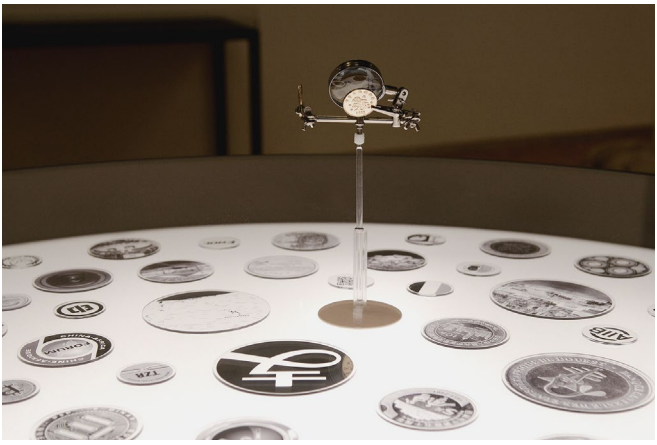

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Fig. 22 Musquiqui Chihying, "The Cultural Center", 2018, exhibition view at *Step Out of the Strange Light*, 2021
Fig. 23 Musquiqui Chihying, "The Cultural Center", 2018, exhibition view at *CHINA ⇄ AFRICA Crossing the World Color Line* at Centre Pompidou in Paris

With the juxtaposition of ancient and new coins or coin-like plates referring to Chinese history and the present and their interconnectedness with African states, Musquiqui connects culture, finances, and power in his work. The artist's starting point for this installation is a historic coin that symbolizes early encounters between China and Africa. Musquiqui refers to the recent archaeological discovery of a 600-year-old Chinese Ming-era coin on the Kenyan island of Manda by a team of archeologists from the Chicago Museum. The coin stems from the early 15th century and is a cash coin used mainly for foreign trade. It was fabricated under Yongle, the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty, who had sent naval commander Zheng He to explore the world and to demonstrate Chinese power in the first half of the 15th century. The recent discovery of the coin in East Africa depicts materialized proof that China's trade contacts with Africa predated those of Europe. It is also evidence against a dominant historical narrative that the Ming Dynasty isolated itself after 1433 and "let" Christopher Columbus explore the world. The artist refers to the prominent coin, which highlights the early Sino-African relations of the 15th century and uses the finding as a historical reference point to criticize a recent phenomenon: the contemporary economic, financial, and cultural ties between China and Africa.

Musquiqui bridges history and present by inventing a new set of Chinese coins that are mounted on top of the Plexiglas of the table (Fig. 23). Here, we can see five fictitious golden coins that are each stamped with significant cultural institutions situated in African states and funded or built by Chinese companies in the 21st century. Musquiqui uses the Chinese coin as both a reference to a historical narrative that interprets China as an early naval power with close ties to Africa and as a critique or comment on contemporary Chinese cultural politics in Africa.

One of the invented coins depicts the contours of an institution which turns out to be the architecture of the National Museum of Black Civilizations in Dakar, Senegal (Fig. 24).

The Museum of Black Civilizations opened in 2018, almost 60 years after Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first President of the Republic of Senegal post-independence, had the idea to build a museum for the histories and legacies of African art and culture in 1966. The vision for the pan-African museum was never realized due to the lack of sufficient funding by the Senegalese state, until China offered to do so. Within the framework of the BRI, China invested majorly in building infrastructure in countries in the Global South, labeling the new economic, social, and cultural connectivity as a win–win situation. Especially with West African States, China has "re-awakened" its cultural relations: it offered to plan and pay for the Museum of Black Civilizations to help fulfil a long-cherished dream and to demonstrate its alignment with other former colonized states:

Fig. 24 Musquiqui Chihying, "The Cultural Center", 2018, exhibition view at CHINA ⇆ AFRICA Crossing the World Color Line at Centre Pompidou in Paris

> Without any risk of reputational damage, China ingeniously offered to build a museum to house the collections of African art that – presumably – everyone knew were held by European and North American museums. Under pressure from the decolonization movement, President Macron made his offer to return African patrimony. With the MBC opening two weeks after the publication of the Restitution Report, Senegal effectively used the Chinese gift to demonstrate that it possessed the infrastructure to keep collections responsibly – in anticipation of restitution by France. (de Jong 2022: 239)

The construction of the museum cost 34 million dollars; it is located in central Dakar and features impressive architecture. Since its inauguration in 2018, it has hosted permanent exhibitions on the human origin in Africa, on the history of masks, on spiritual and religious practices in Africa, and on the history of African slaves in the Americas. The monumental building has the capacity to store and present 18,000 artifacts over 15,000 square meters, but many of the halls are still empty, which sends a distressing signal to the former colonial powers that looted artifacts from African states.

By depicting the architecture of cultural institutions in Africa that are funded and designed by Chinese companies, Musquiqui Chihying criticizes an assumed ownership of past and present culture. Ownership here refers not only to financing the building but also to China's practice as cultural facilitator and supporter in Africa. Thus, with "The Cultural Center," the artist critically comments on the

recent cultural politics between China and Africa, which have intensified notably since the BRI on various levels. In producing Chinese commemorative coins, or to be more exact, in inventing a new Chinese currency that adorns itself with the ownership of important, postcolonial African cultural institutions, Musquiqui's installation not only engages with the relation of financial and symbolic capital but projects a future of Chinese cultural hegemony. As national currencies usually depict national achievements, the artistic use of coins points to relevant questions that are already discussed in academic research concerning Chinese cultural politics: in which sense are African cultural institutions—funded and conceptualized by Chinese companies—Chinese achievements? What, exactly, is achieved? Musquiqui implicitly but strongly critiques the boom in Chinese-government-led investment in Africa, a practice that has created global unease about assumed Chinese neo-colonialism within Africa, disguised as cultural exchange and people-to-people connectivity.

5.2 "The Sculpture" (2018)

The installation "The Sculpture" (2018) consists of an experimental video and a large black-and-white print (Fig. 25). The work entails a critique of the European colonial practice of looting artifacts from their place of origin and presenting them as "their" museal objects, including their abuse as inspirational objects for their own practices. In the black-and-white print, Musquiqui Chihying has created an artistic re-enactment of French politician and art author Andre Malraux's photographic

Fig. 25 Musquiqui Chihying, "The Sculpture", 2018, photograph (b & w), C-Print 150 × 150 cm, part of an installation with a 2 channel video (27 min.)

Fig. 26 Musquiqui Chihying, "The Sculpture" (detail), 2018, photograph (b & w), C-Print 150 × 150 cm, part of an installation with a 2 channel video (27 min.)

staging as world art curator. As art historian Walter Grasskamp pointed out in his book *Andre Malraux and His Imaginary Museum*, this magazine photograph of 1954 is a meticulously planned snapshot that captures how the world should see art: as world art. Malraux uses photography as a mobile means of collecting sculptures from all continents over a timespan of three thousand years, eclectically juxtaposing them. In using photography as a medium that dissolves boundaries, he removes the sculptures from their local contexts and places them on double pages of a catalog next to each other to highlight their assumed aesthetic affinities. His compilation of European abstract sculptures juxtaposed with non-European prehistoric works suggests the problematic universalization of the European concept of art. As such, it reveals Malraux's innovative but colonizing approach to world art as an accessible cultural heritage that belongs to everybody.

In re-enacting this problematic scenario of the European power of interpretation (referred to by Bourdieu as consecration power) over African artifacts, Musquiqui alludes to this moment in European art history and subtly suggests a parallel to the contemporary Chinese practice in cultural politics. For the staging of the print, Musquiqui reenacts himself as Malraux. He is positioned within a black space; loose pages are neatly draped around his shoes. He wears a black suit, smokes a cigarette, and contemplates a piece of paper in his hand. The chosen perspective of the photograph emphasizes a sense and attitude of "overview": on the ground below him, the viewer recognizes images of African sculptures and various historic and contemporary visual footage. Instead of seeing pages of an art book in the publication press, as we did in the original, we see film stills from the same titled video that accompanies the photograph (Fig. 26). Hence, with his

Chinese phenotypic features, the artist seems to embody China as an actor and puts himself on a level with Malraux, who staged himself as a curator of world art: whereas Malraux arranges the photographs of ancient sculptures of non-Western origin as universal world art, Musquiqui arranges photographic clippings of contemporary institutions in Africa and of African sculptures. We can interpret this as "China" looking at the cultural heritage of Africa and seemingly systematizing it into the order of world heritage.

In the second part of the installation, an experimental video, the narrator explains in an educational mode how African artifacts ended up in European art collections, questions why they are still there, and asks if the privilege to collect and categorize can be separated from power. The last question is enlarged upon introducing Xie Yanshen, a prolific collector of African artifacts. He has collected thousands of objects from various ethnic tribes since the 1990s and exhibited them in his private museum in Lome, Togo. Xie recently donated a large part of his collection to the Chinese National Museum in Beijing, where they remain on display today under the gesture of Chinese–African international understanding:

> If we want to develop connections between different peoples in different countries, they first need to understand each other. In the context of the Belt and Road Initiative and China-Africa friendly cooperation, I hope I can do my best to let Chinese better know and appreciate Africa. (Xie Yenshen, cited in "Artwork Diplomacy," Li Jing 2018)

The video is a key element in this series of works, as it not only critically comments on the then common practice of looting African art and assimilating it to European museum practice but also draws parallels between such practices and contemporary collecting practices, exemplified by Swiss and Chinese art collectors. It further poses the eminent question of whether the colonial Western power of appropriation and interpretation is currently replaced by the Chinese and their awakening interest for becoming a cultural hegemony.

With "The Sculpture," the artist alludes to new Sino-African power relations that go beyond the realm of art and cultural heritage. The picture of the Terminator that emerges from the black emphasizes this reading. Whereas Malraux uses the head of a European sculpture to depict his working atmosphere as the work of thoughts, the metal head references another type of work: The Terminator's almost indestructible skeleton contains coltan, the rare metal for mobile phones that is exploited in Congo by Chinese and Western companies. The artist implicitly critiques the boom in Chinese-government-led investment in Africa—a current practice that not only creates global unease about assumed Chinese neo-colonialism but also triggers artists from African countries to respond by visualizing the re-emergence of long-known power structures.

5.3 "The Vitrine" (2022)

"The Vitrine" is a three-channel sound installation consisting of broken vitrines, LED lights, and a sound machine (Figs. 27, 28). The installation comprises three vitrines, of dark glass in different shapes, positioned in a room. They resemble the typical heightened glass cases commonly used in museums to present and protect sensitive or precious artifacts. Their glass of all the vitrines is broken, several large pieces lying on the floor as if the incident had just happened; from the empty vitrines come flashes of neon light. The room leaves the viewer with a puzzling feeling of emptiness but is simultaneously filled with light and sound. A voice from the Off recounts the provenance of invisible objects, including jade carvings, enamel pieces, and snuff bottles, focusing on their looting from the old Imperial Summer Palace in Beijing by Europeans in 1860. During the Opium Wars, Chinese cultural heritage was looted by British and French soldiers, brought to Europe, and kept in European museums or even "mounted and gilded in European workshops to be repurposed into lamp stands, among other things, to decorate European homes, later resurfacing in auction sales" (Mo 2022).

"The Vitrine" clearly critiques the continuing colonialist European exhibition practices and withholding of plundered Chinese artifacts, which are still legally displayed in French national museums, kept there for restoration, research, and

Fig. 27 Musquiqui Chihying, "The Vitrine", 2022, exhibition view, On the Faience of Your Eyes at Gallery Liusa Wang, Paris

Fig. 28 Musquiqui Chihying, "The Vitrine", 2022, exhibition view, On the Faience of Your Eyes at Gallery Liusa Wang, Paris

conservation matters and even publicly sold to private collectors. It belongs to Musquiqui's series of works that revolve around questions of historical and contemporary colonial practices and mindsets which become visible when engaging with culture and art. Together with the other three works of the exhibition at Gallery Liusa Wang, the artist puts emphasis on the continuing significance of cultural tokens in the contemporary cultural politics that is currently unfolding along the China-led BRI.

With its broken glasses and empty showcases, "The Vitrine" alludes to a recurring incident that happened at the Chinese Museum section in one of the most significant French national museums, the Palace of Fontainebleau, a historical royal palace established in 1867 and located 55 kilometers outside of Paris. Here, the plundered Chinese artefacts are still presented like trophies (Fig. 29). Due to its extraordinary architecture and its historical importance (including its artifacts!), it was even designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. In March 2015, the Chinese Museum was robbed, with significant imperial pieces being taken from the collection. It wasn't the first and only case of theft in the Chinese Museum of the Palace of Fontainebleau: already in 1995 and most recently in 2019, precious artworks were stolen from the Chinese Museum. There is a public conception that it is the Chinese who are taking back their cultural heritage and identity—a rather popular conception that has been turned into a recent novel by Grace D. Li titled "The Portrait of a Thief." Musquiqui visually plays with this perception and

Fig. 29 Chinese Museum in Château de Fontainebleau, Paris, exhibition view

asks—similar to the questions in his video "The Sculpture", how the artefacts could have ended up in a French museum, not hidden but proudly presented as precious "own" cultural heritage.

"The Vitrine", like "The Sculpture" and "The Cultural Center", uses oral counter-narrative and critical questions to reveal asymmetrical power relations in the fields of contemporary heritage and museum diplomacy. With its sound installation, "The Vitrine" transforms the exhibition site into a crime scene in a robbed museum, which not only provides audiences with a starting point to review the problematic Asian collection in Western institutions but also responds to the critics Ariella Azoulay and Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung's review of Wandile Kasibe's concept of "museums as crime scenes." (Gallery Liusa Wang 2022). The artwork implies the involvement of strong political forces and a trading network in current repatriation debates, clearly linking it to the contested art auction of Chinese cultural heritage at Christie's in Paris in 2009 (see Section 2). In his work "The Vitrine," Musquiqui Chihying again critiques the historic and present European practice of displaying looted art in state museums like trophies and acknowledges China's experiences with European colonialism. With this installation, he creates the vision of a culturally self-conscious Chinese state that has reawakened to the power of cultural heritage and that aims to regain its cultural hegemony by non-discursive means. Whereas in "The Sculpture", Musquiqui critiques the

European colonial practice of looting art in African States and presenting them in the European museums, "The Vitrine" refers to the same colonial practices by French troops, plundering royal Chinese Palaces. In "The Cultural Center" the artist projects his criticism to the present and future and alludes to Chinese neo-colonial practices in African States, for example in Senegal, thereby creating an awareness for colonial practices repeating themselves in the moment of the powerful positioning of countries—not territorially, but culturally.

Thus, in the selected works, Musquiqui Chihying comments on and critique both the colonial and the postcolonial relationship between Europe, China, and Africa with the example of museum collections and their legacies, predominantly focusing on cultural heritage. Against the context of the China-led BRI, his artworks further comment on China's positioning of a new cultural power that is currently paving its way through African states, juxtaposing it with European colonial practices. In general, Musquiqui depicts and comments on the (neo-/post-)colonial practice of collecting and presenting the Other power, thereby criticizing the role of the (neo-/post-)colonial state as narrator of the past, the present, and the future. He thereby artistically visualizes what Pierre Bourdieu coined the accumulation of symbolic capital through financial and cultural capital, a dynamic that refers not merely to the field of art but increasingly to the field of heritage diplomacy.

6 Conclusion

In analyzing museum exhibitions, museum positionings, and individual artworks in China and on Chinese cultural politics, I have demonstrated how the lens of art as an example of cultural practice can be used to understand and re-think the role of art within New Silk Road Regions. Sections 2, 3, and 4 revealed an emerging art policy of the Chinese state in relation to Chinese cultural heritage and contemporary art and art institutions that increasingly serves as an important tool for developing Chinese cultural policy domestically and abroad.

The analysis of the selected exhibitions, museums, and artworks resulted in two major functions of art in BRI- and China-Dream-related narratives: firstly, art exhibitions are sites of narrative construction and confirmation and can be used politically and socially to legitimize certain actions and perceptions. Furthermore, they are drivers of regional development, often employed by the state and local governments to make a region culturally and economically attractive, similar to the ideas and conceptions that constitute place branding.

Secondly, artworks are forms of local knowledge production and are capable of furnishing an understanding of how local, regional, and national realities are constructed, perceived, and negotiated. In addition, art in its political dimension is

able to produce counternarratives and problematize local and global phenomena in a specific, subtle language.

Especially with the example of the exhibition "Spectacle of Integration" and of the curatorial positioning of MoCA Yinchuan, artworks and artistic practices like exhibition-making are constructing and deconstructing ancient and contemporary narratives in the framework of New Silk Road regions. This further reveals the power aspirations of the Chinese state to evolve into a new actor in the global field of culture. The chosen examples suggest looking at and engaging with a new relation between the Chinese state and contemporary art production and practices. Chinese officials have been increasingly active in terms of exercising the state's symbolic power over cultural matters, domestically and internationally. By developing and transforming its cultural policy in the context of museum development plans, the Chinese state is able to take part in the production of Chinese social reality and perception of it: as a significant actor, the state has the capacity to structure social life and cultural politics, thereby determining values and standards of perception (Kastner 2005). Similar to the artistic movement of Socialist Realism, artworks as well as contemporary exhibition-making in China have become an integral tool to communicate, underline, and legitimize political, social, and cultural agendas and narratives. Since the state has the power to enforce the patterns of perception according to which it aims to be perceived (Kastner 2005), artistic practices supported by the state or what has been earlier described as official art are often used to enforce a political or social ideology like the Chinese Dream and the narratives to implement the BRI. That said, the paper has also demonstrated how artistic counternarratives are deconstructing official narratives. Such a reading refers to the role of art in its function as a counterpoint and mirror to societal transformation.

In concluding this paper, I want to emphasize the significance of art and artistic practices as a methodological approach to engage with and further understand issues related to regional and social knowledge production in the Global South. Sinocentric, Eurocentric or Afrotopian ideas of world realignments emphasize culture and cultural identities as connectivities and disconnectivities between states, regions, localities, and their societies. Large and transregional infrastructure projects that are assumingly forming new geocultural regions, such as the BRI, the European Global Gateway, or the African Union's cultural policy, increasingly turn towards culture, cultural practices, values, and identities and use them in their politics and various narratives at home and abroad. Hence, in making sense of such transregional transformations and various local reactions to them, I suggest using art as a significant means of knowledge production. Art and artistic practices are not only documents of specific philosophical and aesthetic ways of thinking of and participating in the world: they constitute the field of art that is not only an integral

part of society but overlaps with other societal fields such as politics, economics, education, sustainability, etc. It is simultaneously global and local and heavily entangled with markets and politics. Moreover, recently, the field of art has been highly sensitive to social grievances, injustice, and asymmetrical power relations.

On the occasion of the first Berlin Southern Theory lecture,[8] Senegalese scientist and author Felwine Sarr presented his lecture "Rewriting the Humanities from Africa: For an Ecology of Knowledge" at the Ethnological Museum, State Museums in Berlin in 2019, where he tackled such a notion of the arts. In his presentation, which took place at the Ethnological State Museum of Berlin (including its history of possessing looted artworks), Sarr points out that knowledge production is still subject to epistemic injustice, which is injustice related to knowledge. Sarr urges the inclusion of non-academic knowledge production to diversify it and to pay tribute to the fact that each society and culture creates its own forms and figurations of knowledge. To understand those forms of knowledge, researchers—despite their disciplines, but especially in critical area studies—need to engage with what local and regional actors create to make sense of their worlds. Sarr further suggests that, in considering art, theater, orality, or bodies as signs of knowledge, we are able to avoid epistemic injustice and to build theory from diversified and multicentric grounds (Sarr 2019). Especially in critical area studies, art and artistic practices as research objects or documents of time have the capacity to contribute to strengthening local knowledge and to creating local theory as multicentric interaction, bearing in mind that genuine contemporary and postcolonial epistemology is based on multicentricity beyond the Global North (Rehbein 2020).

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8 The Berlin Southern Theory Lecture was held in Berlin and organized by the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology of the Freie Universität Berlin and the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient in collaboration with the Forschungscampus Dahlem.

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Chapter 3

New Chinese Museum Policy?

A Conversation on the Role of Culture in Contemporary China[1]

Minh An Szabó de Bucs and Jamila Adeli
Edited by Jamila Adeli

Jamila Adeli In my postdoctoral project at Humboldt University Berlin, I am investigating what narratives exist about large, transnational infrastructure projects such as the BRI and what significance culture or art has in them. I believe in the potential of art to mirror society, to shape social discourses, and to produce different kinds of knowledge. When we talk about the New Chinese Silk Road, we often hear about how China is involving its neighboring countries financially or economically in major infrastructure projects. We learn little about the cultural relations between China and its partners. In the framework of the BRI, how relevant are such cultural relations? What is the role of culture? Is culture transforming into an instrument of politics and power?

I am particularly interested in how the state acts in the field of art and culture: in the context of the BRI, what is new about Chinese cultural policy? And what

1 This published interview is based on the podcast "Von neuen Korridoren und Seidenstraßen. Ein Podcast zu Kultur und Infrastruktur" https://www.delink-relink.de/2021/12/21/podcast-series-on-chinas-new-cultural-policies/. It was transcribed, translated, and edited for this publication.

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Podcast "Von neuen Korridoren und Seidenstraßen. Ein Podcast zu Kultur und Infrastruktur" by Minh An Szabó de Bucs and Jamila Adeli (in German) about cultural policy and the role of arts and museums in contemporary China.

Minh An Szabó de Bucs and Jamila Adeli. Edited by Jamila Adeli, New Chinese Museum Policy? A Conversation on the Role of Culture in Contemporary China. In: Jamila Adeli and Linda Ammann (eds.), New Silk Road Narratives: Local Perspectives on Chinese Presence along the Belt and Road Initiative. Heidelberg: Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing, 2024, pp. 99–108. https://doi.org/10.11588/hasp.1370.c19721

is driving the Chinese state and its actors to become more involved with art and its policies? I invited Minh An Szabó de Bucs to talk about this topic. She is an expert in the field of Chinese cultural policy. Welcome, An.

Minh An Szabó de Bucs Thank you for the invitation, Jamila. I am looking forward to this conversation.

Jamila Adeli You studied Sinology, Art History, and English in Berlin. You can interpret Chinese. You lived in Taiwan. You are the author of a documentary film about Chinese super-collectors, which was shown two years ago on the German–French television channel ARTE. As an art and culture journalist, you write about the Asian and Chinese art market, among other things, and work as a freelance author for the NZZ, SZ, Tagesspiegel, Monopol, DIE ZEIT, and several art magazines.

Why are you interested in the topic of Chinese cultural policy?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs The topic of Chinese cultural policy has a significant historical and contemporary relevance that is constantly growing. A first keyword for cultural policy in China is certainly the so-called century of humiliation. From the middle of the 19th to the middle of the 20th century, the Chinese state was defeated several times by foreign or Western invaders. For about one century, the Chinese felt colonized and dominated by Western powers such as Great Britain, France, and Japan. The hundred years of national humiliation began with the two Opium Wars of the 19th century.[2] During the Second Opium War, British and French troops plundered and destroyed the Imperial Summer Palace in Beijing. Since then, many cultural treasures and, thus, Chinese cultural heritage have been kept in Great Britain and France, where they are presently stored and presented. UNESCO estimates that around 1.6 million artifacts are currently abroad. According to Chinese experts, the figure is significantly higher, as it doesn't include privately owned objects.

Jamila Adeli Do the artifacts looted back then play a role in current Chinese cultural policy?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs Yes! The aim is to bring the looted cultural treasures back to China. And there are various attempts to accomplish this. One of them is going through international auction houses. China has actually called on its citizens to search for these objects—these artifacts, in other words—to look specifically for auction houses that are offering looted art from China. Those citizens were asked

2 The First Opium War, against British troops, lasted from 1839 to 1842. The Second Opium War, against France and Great Britain, took place from 1856 to 1860.

to bid at auctions, buy back the artifacts and then donate them to a state museum. The National Museum in Beijing or the Poly Museum are examples for state museums that received back looted art through Chinese citizens. An interesting fact in this context is that both state museums and Chinese auction houses belong to the Chinese Ministry of Defense.

Jamila Adeli This is indeed interesting. Could you elaborate on this?
Minh An Szabó de Bucs The Poly Museum is a branch of the Poly Group. This, in turn, reports to the Ministry of Defense and is responsible for several areas and institutions in which it invests. One area is culture, which comprises theater, television, and film as well as art. Art auction houses have not been around for very long in China, and their history is still very young. The first truly internationally recognized auction house is the private auction house China Guardian, founded in 1991, merely 30 years ago. To put it in comparison: the renowned auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's are over 250 years old.

The state-controlled Chinese auction house Poly Auction belongs to the already-mentioned Poly Group and was only founded in 2005. Up until now, Poly Auction has risen to the number one auction house in China. Internationally, Poly Auction ranks third, right behind Christie's and Sotheby's, followed by China Guardian on rank four. Considering that the Chinese auction houses are that young, they have really made it to the top in a very short time. The success of Poly Auction results from its state funding. This indirectly applies to the private auction house China Guardian, since the Chinese government strongly supports and cooperates with the private-sector business.

Jamila Adeli Let's go back to the topic of looted art. How are the looted cultural assets from abroad being returned to China's state museums?
Minh An Szabó de Bucs Various organizations around the world monitor which artefacts are offered at which auction house. Private individuals are asked to visit these auctions, usually wealthy Chinese who can financially afford such an undertaking. The state calls for their patriotism and their love of their country. They are asked to bid at the auctions and bring the art back to China. If they are successful and then donate the retrieved artifacts to the Poly Museum, for example, then of course they receive benefits, economic benefits: tax breaks or benefits for favorable real estate prices. For many, this is an attractive offer. What we can observe here is that the state provides its citizens with targeted incentives, economic incentives, to bring Chinese cultural heritage back from abroad.

Jamila Adeli That sounds quite like a new strategy within Chinese cultural policy, catering to both domestic and international audiences. How would you describe the

relationship between patriotism and Chinese cultural policy which you just sketched? How is it related to the Chinese Dream, referring to a reawakening of the power of the great Chinese Empire through art, so to speak? Does art play a role in this narrative? Is art—in your example, cultural heritage—a means of demonstrating power externally and, perhaps, a reawakening of a Chinese cultural identity internally?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs Yes! I assume that one of China's major goals is to regain the former power or position of the old Chinese Empire and to stand out internationally as one of the great powers. So far, China has achieved quite a lot here politically and economically: China has developed into a serious competitor to the US and is constantly challenging the US and Europe. However, China still has some catching up to do in the area of culture due to the period of Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, when many cultural assets and structures were destroyed. With the destruction and looting of cultural assets, the belief in the importance of culture was also lost, and with it the cultural identity of the state. China is now realizing this in the course of this cultural race to catch up: the country has gained prosperity, the rice bowl is full, it can consume as it pleases, but something is still missing. And the Chinese state is currently trying to fill this void with the culture that it has lost over the centuries. By retrieving the looted artworks, China seems to work on bringing back and reviving its old cultural greatness. We can see this as an act of revenge for the experience of humiliations by Western powers. China is showing its new strength internationally through its ability to retrieve the looted cultural property—a clear demonstration of power.

The Second Opium War, with the destruction and looting of the Old Summer Palace, was not the only humiliation China suffered at the hands of the West. Somewhat later, around 1900, there were further humiliations by Western powers and their efforts to colonialize. European countries such as France and Germany and the US forced tribute payments and attempted to establish colonies. The Chinese fought back against this (and against Christian missionary work), which led to the so-called Boxer Rebellion and, ultimately, to war.

After their victory over the Boxers, the Eight-Nation Alliance[3] once again wreaked havoc and looted art objects. That is considered the second humiliation. The third humiliation happened during the Chinese Civil War between the Kuomintang and the Communists (1927 to 1949), when Kuomintang leader Chiang Kai-shek had to flee to Taiwan. During his retreat, he took thousands of wooden crates on board, which contained a total of around 610,000 imperial artifacts. They

3 The nations that waged war against the Chinese Empire around 1900. They included Italy, the USA, France, Austria-Hungary, Japan, the German Empire, the United Kingdom, and Russia.

are said to be housed in the Palace Museum in Taipei today. This is a significant thorn in China's side, and the state requests their restitution, as they are regarded as imperial property and cultural heritage.

Jamila Adeli Speaking of demonstrating power: how do the impressive, numerous, and often private new museum buildings relate to the new power demonstration of China? To my knowledge, they are mainly internationally oriented. What role do these museums play? Does culture make politics?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs Yes, museums do indeed play a major role in this cultural policy: it's part of catching up in terms of culture. There are not many museums in China, and their history is still very young. Art museums as we know them in the West—in the sense of a public place for art—didn't exist in China for a long time. Those who collected art were either wealthy people or the Chinese emperors. The Chinese word for collecting is *shōucáng* (收藏). And literally translated, *shōu* (收) means "to gather" and *cáng* (藏) means "to hide." Earlier on, art was only presented when friends came to visit. Then the traditional scroll was taken out and rolled up very slowly. People would talk, philosophize, recite poems, and drink wine. That's how art viewing happened in China. It is the opposite of going to a museum and to look at art together with other people. This is certainly the Western model of viewing art or appreciating art, and as a practice, it arrived very late in China.

Jamila Adeli Is there a specific date?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs The opening to Western ideas and Western art came around 1979, with Deng Xiaoping and his policy of opening up to the West. Western art movements such as Expressionism, Impressionism, and Dadaism came to China. Chinese artists and cultural practitioners really embraced this opening and soaked up everything and applied it. That's one of the reasons why Chinese avant-garde art flourished in the 1980s: the Chinese avant-garde was a reaction to the opening up of China. Back then, Chinese artists had no sense of which trends, forms, and contents in Western art history led to one another. At an accelerated speed, they got into everything at once and worked with it from there. This period can be seen as a catalyst for artists and cultural practitioners in China; one could imagine that time of the 1980s and 1990s as a dried-up pond in which all these new ideas were absorbed and from which fresh ideas then unfolded anew. I cannot really pinpoint an exact timing, but the rise of the Western "museum culture" happened simultaneously with the opening up of China to the West.

Jamila Adeli How involved is the state with this new museum policy? It is said that those new big museums in China are often empty; how anchored are they in the Chinese or global art world?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs In 2011, the government's five-year plan called for the building of more museums. This was in fact another call to the Chinese people: 3,500 museums were to be built within five years. Only three years later, this target was achieved. There are now over 5,000 museums; 1,500 of them are private museums. It is mainly the private museums that appear empty. One is bigger and more spectacular than the other. Other than here in Europe, a private museum in China doesn't mean an exhibition area of 1,000 square meters, but 10,000 or 30,000 square meters. They often operate with two, three, four branches in different cities. These museums are completely different dimensions. They are built according to the Western model and often bring Western architects to China to attract attention. They usually exhibit Chinese and Western contemporary art.

Nowadays, Western art is also being collected in China to demonstrate that the Chinese have the money to buy Impressionists or a Gerhard Richter painting. China is now visible and active on the stage of global art; it experienced an upgrade: if you want to see a Modigliani, you can do so in China.

Empty museums are usually located outside major cities, in areas that hold enough space for 30,000-square-meter buildings. But many operators lack the know-how. How do I preserve the art? How do I ventilate? How do I humidify? Mistakes or inexperience quickly leads to mold growth. There is a lack of Western know-how on how to preserve the art objects. And often a lack of audience, as entrance fees are too high. These are two reasons to explain empty museums in China. Another is that Chinese businesspeople are encouraged by the government to build cultural facilities so that they can get tax benefits. If you open not only office buildings and stores in a real estate complex but also a theater, a cinema, or a small museum, then you won't have to pay as much tax. Or the property price is simply being reduced by half. I give you an example from Shanghai: Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei opened the Long Museum together. This museum was so successful that the local government approached them, offered them about 30,000 m^2 of land at a ridiculously low price in a prime location, and encouraged them to open a second museum there. Liu Yiqian and Wang Wei agreed and built a second museum, the Long Museum No. 2. And after a few years, they founded a third museum in Chongqing in a financial district. And a little later, the fourth museum in Wuhan. That's how it works in China.

Jamila Adeli Is that an example of socialism with Chinese characteristics?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs Yes, this is the market economy that was introduced under Deng Xiaoping in 1979. The combination of market economy and socialism has worked well so far: economic growth is increasing, people have gained money. As a result, China witnessed the emergence of new middle classes, who are now spending their money. They are nowadays allowed to possess private property.

This is important when it comes to art because the state is not officially allowed to collect art. Currently, there is no state museum in China that collects contemporary art. Anything the National Museum of Art or the Poly Museum have in their buildings are imperial and historical artifacts, received through donation or endowment.

Jamila Adeli When we look at art in China, do you think we need to critically deconstruct our Western gaze?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs Yes, certainly. In the German media, we focus mainly on human rights violations, dissidents, and the oppression of minorities; in other words, we have a very negative image. This naturally influences the way we look at Chinese art institutions or artists. We often suspect an agenda behind developments in the art world in China. But we overlook the fact that the Chinese art actors simply want to showcase the artistic directions that are currently emerging. We really need to overcome our prejudices and look at China in a more differentiated way—especially since the Chinese government negotiates art and culture with growing self-esteem. It is interesting to note here that, since the French president Emmanuel Macron gave his speech on the restitution of looted art to African states in 2017, the Chinese government is convinced that looted art shall no longer be "re-bought" and brought back to China but officially restituted without any further negotiations or expenses.

Jamila Adeli Could you elaborate on this?

Minh An Szabó de Bucs The most famous example is probably the case of the collection of Yves Saint Laurent, the great fashion designer, which was auctioned by Christie's in 2009.[4] After the death of Yves Saint Laurent, his partner at the time, Pierre Bergé, decided to give the large art collection into auction at Christie's. Among that collection were two bronze heads of the Chinese zodiac signs, the hare and the rat. The two heads belonged to the Imperial Summer Palace in Beijing, which had been destroyed and looted by British and French troops during the Second Opium War in 1860. In the palace, there was a large fountain consisting of 12 bronze statues depicting the 12 zodiac signs. From each animal head, water gushed into a large water basin. Ironically, the fountain was designed and built by a Western missionary named Giuseppe Castiglione. He had had the heads of the animal statues cast in bronze in France and then brought them back to China.

4 For more information on this example, see Erling, Johnny. "Chinese blufft Christie's und will nicht zahlen". *Welt*, 2 March 2009. https://www.welt.de/kultur/article3300077/Chinese-blufft-Christie-s-und-will-nicht-zahlen.html (accessed 16 Feb. 2023).

Strangely enough, China's redemption of its humiliation at the hands of the West manifested itself in the retrieval of these 12 animal heads, which have been scattered all over the world since the looting of the Summer Palace. To date, China has retrieved seven of the 12 animal heads. Four of them are located in the Poly Museum, two in the National Museum, namely, the hare and the rat.

Let me now tell you how they got there: Christie's announced the auction of the Yves Saint Laurent collection in Paris, whereupon China, or more precisely, China's State Administration of Cultural Heritage (SACH), reacts and vehemently opposes the auction because the heads are considered cultural heritage. It should not be auctioned off, but returned. The case went all the way to the highest court in France. However, China loses in court. The auction goes ahead, and the animal heads are allowed to be auctioned. The auction happens on February 25 in 2009. There was a huge bidding war, and, after several minutes, an anonymous Chinese collector who had bid by telephone won the auction for around 31 million euros—and immediately refused to pay! This is an affront, causing a real scandal. For the logic of the auction house, the animal heads are now "burned" and cannot be auctioned again. In a press conference held in Beijing, the telephone bidder identified himself afterwards as Cai Mingchao, Chinese collector and businessman from Southern China. He argued that the animal heads already belong to China, so there is no need to pay for them. Cai is also an adviser to the National Treasures Fund, a government-affiliated NGO founded in 2005 with the mission of returning looted cultural artifacts to China.[5]

Shortly afterwards, the Chinese government issued stricter customs regulations against Christie's in China in response to the auction. A little later, Bergé tried one more time to offer the bronzes, but ties his offer in exchange to Tibet's freedom. This was seen as infringement upon "the Chinese people's cultural rights under the pretext of human rights" (cf. Erling 2009).

After that second attempt, the animal heads are stored for several years, until the French collector Francois-Henri Pinault buys them in April 2013. It is important to note that Pinault is the owner of the Christie's auction house. In a major bilateral state ceremony, he donated the heads to the Chinese government. In return, he is granted permission to do business with his Christie's auction house on Chinese soil. Previously, it was permitted for Western auction houses to operate in China without Chinese partners. As a result, Christie's has been allowed to hold its own art auctions on the Chinese mainland since 2013. A connection between Pinault's donation and Christie's Chinese presence is officially denied.

5 Cai described his final bid as a "protest action" made on behalf of the Chinese people (Erling, March 2, 2009).

Jamila Adeli Thank you, that was quite a vivid example of how the Chinese state considers art and culture as political tools. Based on your long-term engagement with Chinese cultural policy, what has surprised you repeatedly or most recently?
Minh An Szabó de Bucs First of all, I was surprised that China experienced being deprived of its cultural heritage due to colonialism, and that many national treasures are still abroad. I wasn't aware how many artefacts were stolen and placed in European museums and institutions. I didn't realize for quite some time what important functions were attributed to cultural heritage. After all, it's not just about getting the objects back, but ultimately about re-establishing identity, one's own culture, history, and self-confidence in China.

I was surprised at how symbolically charged this repatriation policy is. This policy is a reawakening of China's former strength and cultural greatness—and there has been already a great many works of artefacts restituted, roughly around 4,000. Two or three years ago, the National Museum in Beijing presented three floors of restituted looted art in an exhibition. The exhibition was celebrated as a triumph, with the individual objects being presented like trophies on pedestals. That was not just an exhibition but the demonstration and call for patriotism, greatness, and power of a new China.

Secondly, I was surprised that Chinese collectors are so incredibly young. They are in their mid-20s to 30s and got wealthy either through their family or through their own work. They have so much money that they can travel and buy at any international art fairs. They are also very interested in Western art. All that was quite eye-opening for me: these young people are culturally very engaged; they want to connect with art and be around art. They are not only investing in real estate or clothes but also in artworks.

Jamila Adeli How is this young generation of art collectors presenting their artworks? Do they also "collect and hide," as you mentioned earlier?
Minh An Szabó de Bucs No, no, it's completely different if not exactly the opposite. Nowadays, this generation "collects and shows off." These young collectors exhibit their art in the huge, spectacular, and very aesthetic private museums we mentioned before.

Jamila Adeli To conclude our interview, what else is there to say about new Chinese cultural policy?
Minh An Szabó de Bucs If you want to understand and learn about cultural policy in contemporary China, go and visit the country. Take a look at the museums, for example, at K11 in Hong Kong, which is a huge art mall. Its founder, Adrian Cheng, had the idea to bring art directly to the young people, to the sites where they spend their time: shopping malls. With K11, Cheng actually installed a work by

Olafur Eliasson next to a Gucci or a jeans store. In order to bring young people into contact with culture and art, he placed art where young people spend a lot of time. It works very well. K11 has expanded, and there are about 12 museum branches throughout China, for example, in Beijing, Shanghai, and Wuhan. The slogan of his art malls is "in art we live," indicating that the new generation of Chinese people should live side by side with the arts and embrace cultural education.

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Part II

Narrative of the Chinese Dream and the BRI from an African Literary Perspective

Chapter 4

When the Chinese Dream Turns into a Nightmare

Reading Remi Raji's "Mandarin Song" in the Context of African Literary Visions on China–Africa Relations

Susanne Gehrmann

1 Introduction

Over the last decades, a growing body of literary fiction from different African regions has developed that speaks loudly to the topic of translating the Chinese Dream in the sense of elaborating an African perspective of understanding and questioning China's infrastructural and geopolitical aspirations on the continent. In political and development discourse, it has often been underlined how much Africa welcomes China as a new economic, political, and—maybe to a lesser extent—also cultural partner. As a superpower that is not involved in the colonial ties of the past that are still dominating patterns of "cooperation" and political conflicts between Africa and Europe, China stands as an influential alternative. Today, for most African countries, China is a strategic infrastructural partner. Meanwhile, creative literature (as well as film and the arts in general, though these will not be my topic here) offers a space of critical engagement. The body of literature that deals with China–Africa relations has increased since 2013, when the Belt and Road Initiative started, and research in that growing corpus

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Recording of the poem "There Is a New Train Coursing through Our Lands (Mandarin Song)" by Remi Raji

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has started to thrive recently (Chavoz / Leroux / Paravy 2021, Yoon 2023).[1] For, indeed, the diversity of the literary genres, authors from different African regions, and the variety of standpoints expressed with regard to the Chinese Dream in African literatures triggers a number of questions: which narratives on Chinese infrastructure projects (on the one hand) and on political, social, and cultural Africa–China relations (on the other) do we find in African literatures? What are the genres, forms, and languages of such narratives? How do literary texts participate in constructing or deconstructing dominating official discourse on the Sino-African partnership as a mutually beneficial endeavor? Do African writers respond to Chinese aspirations of building their New Silk Road in harmony with the China Dream? Or, by contrast, is it reformulated and appropriated in a different way from an African perspective? In short, how does literature consider the Chinese Dream, and what are actually the Chinese Dreams of Africans? But also: when and how can dreams turn into nightmares?

In this essay, I strive to contribute to this relatively new research field by focusing on the close reading of one poem from Nigeria as a case study. However, before doing so, I will venture into a quick overview of selected texts that represent gross trends in African writing on China. The analytical progression moves from the early dream of solidarity to its later complication, and from utopic and dystopic projections into the future to the lyrical nightmare of my case study.

2 Dreams and Nightmares of China in African Literatures

In 1960, the prime decade of Africa's decolonization which morphed directly into the Cold War period, the People's Republic of China immediately became an appealing partner for those countries, like Ghana, the Republic of Congo, or Tanzania, that opted for a socialist / communist political orientation. Therefore, in his long praise poem for the African heroes of independence "The Black Eagle

1 Beyond single articles on particular authors and works, these two publications stand out. In 2021, Ninon Chavoz, Pierre Leroux, and Florence Paravy co-edited a special issue of the journal *Études littéraires africaines*, entitled *De la Chinafrique,* that dealt with Anglophone and Francophone writing on Chinese–African relations. The title's calque on the pejorative term *Françafrique* that epitomizes France's neocolonial interests in Africa is striking. In his seminal monograph *China in Twentieth and Twenty-First-Century African Literature*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2023, Duncan M. Yoon draws on poetry, novels, essays, and autobiographical writings. To my knowledge, this is the first comprehensive study on the representation of China and Chinese people in African literature. In my article, I will limit myself to referencing poetry and prose fiction.

Awakes," the Ghanaian poet Koffi Awonoor (1935–2013) writes the following lines: "Our forces have redoubled / And from distant Asia / Another people whose victory echoes reached us / Have joined our ranks" (1965: 41, quoted), thereby expressing the hope for unconditional Chinese–African solidarity in the fight against colonialism and neo-colonialism. As Duncan M. Yoon points out: "The only nonwhite and non-Western socialist state at that time, the PRC, and Maoism particularly, symbolized an alternative path to development and national self-determination that was not based on the racial capitalism of colonialism" (Yoon 2023: 32). In view of the violence of the Cultural Revolution starting in Maoist China in 1966 and, much later, the 1989 Tian'anmen massacre of protesting students, Koffi Awonoor's political and poetic stance on China would become much more critical later on.[2] Yet it is in the early 1960s, as epitomized by Awonoor's above-quoted poem, that the Africans' Dream of unconditional Chinese solidarity with their postcolonial nation-building came into being. And it was, indeed, a dream sustained by the tangible engagement of Chinese donors and workers in many African countries.

A good example of the African Chinese Dream as an alternative form of collaboration in the spirit of solidarity as expressed in literature can still be found in the early 1990s, in Nuruddin Farah's novel *Gifts* (1993).[3] Against the backdrop of a harsh economic crisis, the novel focuses on Duniya, a widow and a nurse, fighting to make a decent living for her children and herself in the economically collapsing city of Mogadishu. On the one hand, the novel deals with gift-giving as a fundamental gesture of social cohesion,[4] including the adoption of an abandoned child and Duniya's opening up her heart to a new love. On the other hand, it deals with development aid. Gifts as alms are critically scrutinized by Farah through an intermedial technique of weaving press clippings into the text that speak of the growing dependence of Somalia on foreign donors as a form

2 Yoon's Chapter 1 in "Kofi Awoonor Imagines China. The Longue Durée of Ghana-PRC Relations" (2023: 17–53) offers an in-depth analysis of Awoonor's poetry, travel writing, and essays dealing with China.

3 One of Africa's most acclaimed writers, Nuruddin Farah has been living in exile from his home country, Somalia, since 1974. Farah writes mainly complex novelistic trilogies (see Musumba 2023: 52–77). *Gifts* is the second part of the *Blood in the Sun* trilogy that consists of *Maps* (1986), *Gifts* (1993), and *Secrets* (1998) and revolves around Somalia's political and economic crisis in the 1980s, leading to the beginnings of the Somali Civil War in the early 1990s.

4 In the novelistic peritext, Farah refers explicitly to Marcel Mauss' anthropological theory of the gift.

of ongoing coloniality.[5] While writing Somali subjects as complex, emotional, sensitive, inventive, and highly reflective characters, the contrast provided by the clippings, which merely see Somalis as passive receivers of alms, constitutes subtle yet "robust critiques of the business and discourse of humanitarianism" (Masterson 2013: 180). In this context, Duniya's thoughts on the Chinese presence in the hospital where she works constitute an interesting third dimension:

> Duniya suddenly felt an **empathy** with the Chinese, remembering it was the People's Republic of China that built and donated the Benaadir Maternity Hospital to the people of Somalia. The **modesty** of the Chinese as a donor government was **exemplary**. No pomp, no garlands of see-how-great-we-are. Somewhere in the hospital grounds was a **discreet** plaque announcing the day, month and year in which it had been commissioned and by whom. And you would meet the Chinese doctors who came as part of the gift, as they did their rounds, **soft** of voice, short of breath when they spoke Somali, **humble** by gesture. Unlike the Italian and Dutch doctors on secondment from their governments as an overpriced aid package from the European community, the Chinese did not own cars. They arrived at work in a van, in which they returned to their commune in the evening. And unlike other doctors (including Dr. Mire) who ran their own vehicles, the Chinese gave lifts to nurses working the same shifts as themselves. (Farah 2000: 20, my emphasis)

Through this quote, the exemplary humility of the Chinese government as a donor, as well as that of the highly qualified yet modest Chinese health workers sent to Somalia, are set in a sharp contrast to European modes of development aid. It is thanks to their benevolent solidarity that Duniya feels empathy with the Chinese. Their simple collegial gesture to offer lifts to Somali nurses, as described in the last sentence, opens the everyday professional relationship up to a shared humanity that is not a given when it comes to European representatives in development aid cycles.

With regard to the historical context, it must be kept in mind that Farah is writing in the early 1990s, looking back at Somalia in the 1980s. At that time, China itself was still largely considered a developing country and far from being the economic superpower that it became in the 21st century. Africa's dream of China as a reliable partner acting out of real solidarity between countries of the South, as opposed to a neo-colonially inclined North, is thus inscribed and consolidated in Farah's novel. The narrative clearly suggests that in the given context, for Somalis, Chinese kindness beats European arrogance when it comes to help a people in distress.

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5 On the dialectics of the meanings of gift-giving in the novel's postcolonial context, see also Ngaboh-Smart 1996 and Woods 2003.

While the erstwhile positive vision and appreciation of Sino-African cooperation is still alive to some extent, above all in political and diplomatic discourse (Chanka 2022, Serem 2022),[6] the views of African intellectuals, academics, and creative writers have become much more critical in the 21st century. A good case study for this shift is offered by Duncan M. Yoon's article on Congolese literature "Figuring Africa and China. Congolese Literary Imaginaries of the PRC" (2021), which compares V. Y. Mudimbe's 1973 novel *Entre les Eaux* with two novels released in 2014. Mudimbe's novel features a plot set during the early post-colonial Congo rebellions of the 1960s led by Pierre Mulélé, a committed Maoist. Although the protagonist is a Catholic priest who does not espouse Maoism unconditionally, torn as he is between the revolution and the church, the novel clearly points to "how pervasive the Chinese revolution had become as an anticolonial symbol" (Yoon 2021: 172) for Congolese resistance to Mobutu's rising dictatorship[7] and capitalist neocolonialism. By contrast, in both contemporary Congolese novels, Koli Jean Bofane's *Congo Inc. Le testament de Bismarck* and Fiston Mwanza Mujila's *Tram 83*, Chinese people figure as witty businessmen partaking in extracting the riches of Congo's soil "void of any ideological conviction" (Yoon 2021: 190), driven by "an urgency to exploit" (Yoon 2021: 192).

The classical socio-critical realist novel is a genre that is, without doubt, apt for analysis of transformation processes and their effects on economic, social, and political issues. In the context of China–Africa relations, this genre has been successfully adopted by the Zambian Makuka Chipanta.[8] To read his novel *A Casualty of Power* (2016) is to enter a space of reflection on the paradoxes of Chinese–African—here, specifically Chinese–Zambian—relationships. The novel is built on the narrative device of "duophony,"[9] as it alternates between the focalization of two male protagonists: Hamoonga, who is a Zambian worker in a Chinese-owned

6 These are two contributions from Ethiopia and Kenya to the essay collection *China and the World in a Changing Context* (2022) that continue to acclaim the South–South cooperation model between China and African states.

7 Ironically, it was Mobutu who would adopt the Chinese Mao-style suit, known as the Congolese Abacost (short for *à bas le costume*—down with the suit, meaning the European suit). On Mobutu's strategic exploitation of Mao's popularity, see Yoon 2021: 183–188.

8 Mukuka Chinpanta is a Zambian aerospace engineer currently living in the US and an occasional fiction writer.

9 I use "duophony" as a derivation from Mikhail Bakhtine's concept of polyphony that explicates the conflicting presence of several points of views in the modern novel. Chipanta narrows the device down to two opposing focalized voices, brought across by an omniscient third person narrator.

copper mine, and Jinan, who is one of the Chinese managers of this same mine. *A Casualty of Power* was maybe the first African piece of writing that went beyond looking at Chinese people as more or less anonymous agents of a powerful economic–political entity by introducing an individualized and rounded Chinese character. By avoiding a one-sided point of view and diving into the personal development of both protagonists, their loves and their aspirations for a better future, the novel humanizes both.[10]

Against the backdrop of real protest movements and violent fights in Chinese-owned mines in Zambia,[11] the novel has a *medias in res* beginning, as in the first chapter the two protagonists tragically clash during a mine worker's protest led by Hamoonga. Jinan, who, together with the other Chinese, fears for his life when confronted by the furious African workers, shoots Hamoonga's colleague Kalala. Starting from this low point of action that symbolically confirms Chinese power over African working forces, the novel uses flashbacks to narrate the background stories of both men. Due to harsh tribulations in his life, Hamoonga, we learn, "had been relegated from being a bright university student in the capital city to a mere labourer in a Chinese-owned copper mine under the supervision of a hard task master named Jinan Hu" (Chipanta 2016: 6). Notably, the also novel reminds us that, despite its booming economy, China as a state is far from being able to provide satisfying working conditions and prosperity for all of its citizens. Jinan hails from a modest background and, just like Hamoonga, he was brought up in poverty. His family invested in their only child to obtain a degree in engineering that would allow him to work abroad. The position in the copper mine is an upward mobility opportunity for Jinan; by contrast, it means social descent for Hamoonga, who had already been an advanced student when he had to give up

10 While Shi (2021) does also underline the humanizing of China–Africa relations in the novel, their reading also points to the "pitfalls of a representation" that does not shy away from depicting the mutual stereotyping and racialization between Chinese and Zambians. As pointed out in an analysis by Chavoz and Yuan (2021), the latter tendency can also be found in a shorter prose piece from Kenya, "The Road Workers of Chalbi" (2015) by Dalle Abraham.

11 I quote from Stephanie Lämmert's 2017 book review for the background: "Chinese investors have been criticized on account of unsafe working conditions, violations of the Zambian labour law including salaries too low to survive on, and the use of abusive language and beatings. Tensions between Chinese supervisors and owners and Zambian mine-workers have resulted in a number of violent clashes, the most prominent being the shooting at the then Chinese-owned Collum Coal Mine in 2010 that left thirteen Zambian miners injured and the subsequent protests two years later during which one Chinese mine manager died."

on his degree due to lack of financial means. Though Hamoonga, who studied journalism, is overqualified for the job as a mining worker, he accepts it simply for the sake of his survival and, consequently, becomes the leader of a protest movement against unfair working conditions, tragically resulting in the death of a close comrade.

The title of the novel indicates right from the beginning that the deadly casualty is the result of unequal power relations between Chinese and Zambian workers. What might be labeled as an accident by the mine owners counts as murder for the subalterns. While in the novel Jinan is deliberately not constructed as a villain and not condemned as an individual, through his position in the mine he clearly is a representative of the powerful Chinese system that imposes its patterns of hard work for low wages on the Zambians. His mortal gun is the metonymic symbol of that power. The flagrant absence of intervention by the Zambian state to protect its citizens who become contractual workers in Chinese-owned mines is also deplored. By imagining the exploding conflict in the mine and the tragic death of one young Zambian man standing in as an allegorical figure for so many other Africans who take on jobs in Chinese infrastructural projects, Chipanta's narrative offers a clear-cut critique of the Chinese Dream's fulfilment in Africa. And yet, I concur with Stephanie Lämmert: "his narrative about the Zambian-Chinese encounter in the mining industry is a balanced and careful one, a successful attempt to move away from a one-sided portrayal of 'Zambian victims' and 'Chinese exploiters'" (Lämmert 2017, blog review).

While, in my view, a realistic approach prevails over crime fiction patterns in this particular novel, Duncan M. Yoon (2023: 54–102) reads *A Casualty of Power* as a thriller, alongside the detective novel *Gold of Our Fathers* (2016) by Kwei Quartey, which is, so to speak, the Chinese-in-Africa episode of a popular Ghanaian crime fiction series. It is, indeed, striking how often crime, mainly assassinations, comes up as a plot element in African literature that touches on Chinese–African relations. Abdoulaye Imorou (2021) elaborates on the figure of the serial killer in two novels from the Senegalese and Ivorian diaspora in France. In Khadi Hane's *Demain, si Dieu le veut* (2015) and Koffi Kwahulé's *Nouvel an chinois* (2015), Chinese people are killed in a move to avenge their taking over of space, riches, and, more generally, positions of power. Imourou criticizes the victim discourse that comes along with such narratives.

The Chinese Dream's presence in Africa in the form of investments, donations, and huge infrastructural projects has also triggered African writers of science fiction and, more specifically, African futurism to reflect on Africa's future in light of its relationship with China. For that matter, two opposing trends, utopian vs. dystopian, can be observed, and I will briefly elaborate on one example for each one of the opposing trends here.

In her utopian futuristic novel *Rouge impératrice* (2019), Cameroonian writer Léonora Miano[12] imagines a unified and prosperous Africa. The union of Katiopa, which gathers most though not all sub-Saharan African countries under its flag, is posited as a truly decolonized nation on the political and cultural—but, importantly, also on the economic and monetary—levels.[13] It has become a new superpower in the world, alongside China, India, and South Korea, whereas Europe and North America have declined. In this utopian narrative, China remains a privileged partner for Katiopa / Africa but is no longer presented as a superior power. Exchange of goods, as well as exchange in the educational sector, takes place between equal partners (Miano 2019: 277).

By contrast, in his earlier short story "The Sale" (2012), Zimbabwean writer Tendai Huchu[14] elaborates a dystopic vision of an African future. In his text, Zimbabwe has been taken over by a consortium of the United States of America and China, "Chimerica" (Huchu 2012: 34), which has joined neo-colonial forces for the total subjugation of African populations and undamped exploitation of the land's and the soil's riches. Zimbabweans are being kept under control through a technically sophisticated system and by drugging them into unconsciousness. The resistance of one young man against the sale of Great Zimbabwe, which had remained an enclave of African pride, tragically fails, leading him into suicide.

Analysing "The Sale" alongside other sci-fi short stories from South Africa dealing with China, Nedine Moonsamy writes: "Narratives of this kind surface neo-colonial fears that a 'new scramble for Africa' seems imminent. But they also provide a speculative arena to interrogate how we ultimately perceive the value, use and future of Sino-African political friendship" (Moonsamy 2019b). While Léonora Miano's utopic novel succeeds in reconciling the Chinese Dream with the African dream of independence and prosperity, such dystopic projections into the future dismiss the Chinese Dream as a nightmare for Africans. The function

12 Léonara Miano was born and bred in Duala, Cameroon. She moved to France as a student, where she started her writing career, and currently lives in Togo. She is a renowned novelist and essayist, well known for her concept of Afropéa and Afropean identity constructions as a post-racist utopia (Miano 2020). *Rouge impératrice* is her first futuristic novel.

13 The currency in Katiopa is the *pesa*, the Swahili word for money. This is more than a banal detail of Miano's utopia, given that even today, the value of the former French colonies' currency, the Francs CFA, is highly dependent on France. In some English-speaking countries, but also notably in the DRC, the American dollar has almost replaced the weak local currency for substantial transactions.

14 Tendai Huchu hails from Zimbabwe and has been living in Scotland since 2015. His early writings deal with queer identities and migration. In recent years, he has become a celebrated fantasy genre writer.

of speculative fiction of these two tendencies is either to be read as a warning against China's aspirations on the continent[15] or as an encouragement to push Sino-African relations to a higher level that seeks a partnership on equal terms.[16] It is the dystopic strand, stemming from the fear of a new scramble, and even a new form of slavery,[17] as the Nigerian poet Remi Raji suggests, that leads directly over to my close reading.

3 The Belt and Road Railways as a Lyrical Nightmare: Close Reading

Remi Raji's poem "There Is a New Train Coursing through Our Lands (Mandarin Song)" has recently been published in his latest poetry collection *Wanderer Cantos* (2022).[18] I will undertake a stylistic close reading of the rhetorical devices used in the poem and carve out the underlying meanings in order to show that the poem can be read as a lyrical nightmare that speaks of Africa–China relations as a new form of subjugation and recolonization of the continent by the Asian superpower.

In this regard, the phonetic closeness between the title's verb "coursing" (movement) and cursing (the act of pronouncing a spell) as a first rhetoric device embedded in the title is striking. The subtitle in brackets, Mandarin Song, makes sure that the reference to China will be understood by every reader, given that the poem itself never mentions China while speaking about it all the time. The "new train" of the title is also the central metonymy of the poem, referring both to the real infrastructural project of highly prestigious railway projects initiated by the Belt and Road Initiative all over Africa and to the figurative dimension of the "new train" as a powerful vehicle that traverses lands with an intent of claiming, if not ownership; at least, power over resources and people, as the poem as a whole

15 Monsaamy analyzes Abigail Godsell's short story "Taal" as an example.

16 Moonsamy analyzes Mandisi Nkomo's short story "Heresy" as an example.

17 In Tendai Huchu's "The Sale," remote-controlled Zimbabweans figure as slave-like manpower for US / China profiteers.

18 Remi Raji: *Wanderer Cantos*. Noirledge Publishing, Ibadan 2022. Remi Raji is the pen name of Aderemi Raji- Oyelade, a professor of English at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria. An expert on postproverbials and longstanding research fellow as well as cooperation partner of the seminar of African studies at HU-Berlin, Raji is also an internationally renowned poet. *Wanderer Cantos* is his seventh collection of poetry.

suggests. In eight verses in the fourth stanza of the poem, poetic license allows the railroads to be aligned by use of anaphor and alliteration, thus running

> from Cairo to Cape Town
> from Kigali to Kampala
> from Bujumbura to Banjul
> from Lagos to Luanda, to Lilongwe
> from Harare to Conakry to Nairobi
> from Abuja to Accra to Addis
> from Dakar to Dar es Salaam
> from Maputo to Marrakech (Raji 2022: 24)

While this arrangement only partially reflects the reality of the Belt and Road railway projects,[19] the device of alliteration underlines the beauty of naming African capitals in phonetic resonance to each other and forwards a pan-African perspective. The fifth line of the uniformly structured eight verses brings in an ironic twist by breaking away from the scheme of alliteration and proposing a rather absurd trainline running from Zimbabwe in the southeast to Guinea in the far west and then back to Kenya in the east. In any case, this stanza confronts the reader with the audacity, if not megalomania, of the Chinese Belt and Road railway system for Africa from which the central metonymy of the train stems. Clearly, it is for the transport of goods more than for the mobility of African citizens that the extensive Chinese project wants to link all major African cities across the continent by rail and, beyond this, create more shipping tracks and even railways leading directly from Africa to Asia.

The central theme of the poetry collection *Wanderer Cantos* in which the poem is embedded is the experience of travel, transcultural encounters, and the growth of the lyrical voice's wisdom through experience as a wanderer between worlds. While this feeds into Remi Raji's own lifestyle as a widely travelled international scholar, the lyrical voice itself is a poetic construction that reaches beyond the empirical author. In harmony with this general approach of the volume, in the first stanza, the lyrical voice poses as an experienced traveler who has traversed the landscapes (verses 1, 2, 6) and knows the people (verses 3–7) of "these lands"

19 For instance, yes, there is a line planned that would connect Kigali and Kampala, but its starting point is Bujumbura and the last station is Nairobi, thus connecting four Eastern African capitals. Complete transversal lines from North to South, as in "Cairo to Cape Town," or West to East, as in "Dakar to Dar-es-Salaam," are, however, not planned as part of the Chinese Belt and Road system. Nevertheless, these evoke earlier colonial projects. The never-completed Cape to Cairo Railway was actually a dream of Cecil Rhodes (see Tabor 2003).

(verse 1), which can be identified as African territories by reading on to the fourth stanza. "These lands" are also "our lands" in the title. Therefore, the individual "I," the wandering poetic persona, can be read as the admonishing voice that speaks to a collective with whom they identify. Travelling the "valleys and hills" (verse 1) metaphorically also alludes to the ups and downs in African political and social history, and, while being in communion with "kings and commoners" (verse 3) over shared suppers (we might even think of the spiritual dimension of the holy supper here), the speaker confirms that they are familiar with all classes of the populations. The telling of what follows in this poem is all the more a necessary act because the speaker has encountered both powerless people who "have no voice" (verse 7) and "complicit men and women" (verse 3), who, as potential or real profiteers of the situation, "kill their conscience" (verse 4) and will remain utterly silent, as the metaphor of zipping one's lips (verse 4) indicates. The travelling poet thus poses as the speaker of an unwanted truth and voice of the voiceless.

However, stanza 2 starts by stating the speaker's perplexity in front of the urgency they perceive and the silence around them. The first line, "I don't know why" (verse 8), is repeated a dozen times throughout the poem (verses 11, 13, 29, 32, 33, 39, 40, 42, 44, 46, and 48), thus functioning as a refrain of bewilderment in an astounding situation. Stanza 2 is a figurative appeal to the community to enter into a serious dialogue on the current situation. It uses negation of that urgent communication which is desired from the point of view of the speaker twice: "we do not debate" (verse 9); "we cannot argue" (verse 11). Quoting "delicate climate" in verse 9 might allude to the climate change that affects Africa in many ways, but also to the political climate that allows foreign investors, above all China, to pursue their projects in unconditional "cunning ways" (verse 10). Verse 12 is built on the juxtaposition of two strongly contrasting terms: "revolution" and "slavery." While the current absence of a spirit of revolution is deplored, calling the evil of the current situation "the new slavery around us" binds the presence back to the history of the transatlantic slave trade, Africa's deep collective wound whose reminiscence here must be read as a strong warning not only against the Chinese but also against corrupt structures that would allow the Asian investors to become dominating masters. Just as certain African profiteers had been complicit with the European triangular trade and contributed to the silencing of the suffering of their enslaved fellow humans, today, the poem implies, a similar situation is once again threatening to injure the fragile continent, which is still struggling with its post-slavery and post-colonial heritage.

The short stanza 3, consisting of three lines, opens with a repetition of the poem's title before it ventures into onomatopoeia. The shuffling of the train is imitated in a stuttering manner: "FAKA-FIKI FOKO-FAKA FOOO! / FOCO-FACA FACA-FICI FOOOO!" (verses 14, 15). While the use of majuscules, exclamation

marks, and multiplication of the vowel O at the end of each line clearly indicate the loudness and the power of the c(o)ursing train, the emphasis on the consonant F and the change from K to C between the two verses is not as easily translatable into a straightforward sense. These devices rather stand as a riddle that will be solved through the first verse of the following stanza.

Indeed, at the beginning of stanza 4, the onomatopoetic lines merge into the word FOCAC, repeated as F-O-C-A-C (verse 17); this indicates the emphasized spelling of each letter, which the reader can now understand as standing in for the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation.[20] The train's rushing noises stand in for the noisy (read: spectacular) decisions that were taken during this forum. Thus, the forum itself merges with the train metaphor: it literally becomes the "choo choo train / their silent electric train" (verses 17, 18). The juxtaposition of the "choo choo train," the common onomatopoetic form to be found in popular English language children's songs (Shukla 2023) referring to steam locomotion, with the discreetness of the "silent electric train" as the latest technical advancement, contradictorily seems (on the one hand) to belittle and (on the other hand) to praise the China train. Both are wrong tracks, as the two following epithets of the train make clear: "The new Amistad / hoisting the Mayflower flag" (verses 18–19). The train metonymy is now amplified by use of the erstwhile vehicles of colonial expansion and conquest, haunting vessels of the past. The famous slave ship Amistad stands as a synecdoche for the transatlantic and inner-American slave trade, and the Mayflower that brought the first English settlers to Massachusetts in 1620 is the commonly known symbol for the beginning of the systematic colonization of Northern America. Through this device, the poem clearly and harshly and associates China's investments and endeavors in Africa with a colonial setting and the exploitation of the African workforce. Furthermore, here the references to America instead of Europe add an additional layer of meaning: more often than not, it is capitalist America, China's ideological opponent, that is heavily criticized for its neo-colonial politics towards the global South. But is China, the poem seems to suggest, really different from America in this regard?

After the anaphoric / alliterative longer sequence of the figurative railways that I have quoted above, in the next stanza, the lyrical persona continues their lament in view of the dominating ignorance and silence on what is now bluntly

20 The Forum for China–Africa Cooperation was founded in 2000. Every third year a summit takes place in China or in one of the 53 African member states. So far Ethiopia, Egypt, South Africa, and Senegal have hosted the forum's summit on the continent. The trilingual platform http://www.focac.org/ (Mandarin, English, and French), offers a close follow-up on Sino-African cooperation, successful Chinese infrastructural and economic projects, meetings, and initiatives.

called "the new scramble" (verse 27), with reference to the imperial Scramble for Africa in the late 19th century. In continuation of the extended transportation metaphor: "The captains are ready; the drivers legion" (verse 26), meaning there are enough people, most probably on both the Chinese and the African side, to take on leading roles in the trafficking of African raw materials and industrialized Chinese goods, an exchange that is reminiscent of the earlier triangular trade and later colonial and neo-colonial exploitation. The speaker is further bewildered to find that "the passengers are silent / and dying in these coaches of debt" (verses 28, 29). The passengers allegorize the common African women and men who silently embark—or are being made to embark—upon a journey whose outcome they seem not to understand. "Coaches of debt" is a blunt image that underlines an often forgotten fact: Chinese cooperation with Africa is not based on selfless gifts alone. While generous donations do exist, the big infrastructural projects of the Belt and Road Initiative come along with the contraction of new debts for African nations, who mostly have not even yet mastered the cycle of debts to the West that has forced harsh economic adjustment programs on them since the 1980s. The new debts contracted with China will not only create a new dependency; they also lower the capacities of African states to cater for the social wellbeing of their citizens, who figuratively suffocate in "the coaches" of the metonymic China train.

The refrain line "I don't know why" that was introduced in stanza 2 is again used in stanzas 5, 6, and 7. In the following two lines of stanza 5, the speaker ventures into an indirectly expressed appeal to writers and intellectuals, solely addressed as "the court of poets" (verse 30) and "thinkers in trance" (verse 31), two expressions that allude to longstanding African cultural traditions such as highly developed royal court poetry[21] and spiritual practices of speaking in trance as a means to reach a higher level of consciousness. Poets and thinkers, writers and teachers are groups who have a function as mediators between the mighty and the people. They should be the ones to speak out about the danger of Africans trusting the Chinese Dream; instead, "they are dead to the common fear aground" (verse 32).

A slight alternation of the refrain then speaks of the lyrical voice's mistrust with regard to two further groups: "I don't know who to believe" (verse 32), followed by the chasm "between the political economists and the economic politicians" (verse 33) that stresses the deception experienced by the political leadership and the economic elite alike. In the next two lines, these are even more unrelentingly criticized by use of a metaphor that creates disgust when they are said to be "they who bring rotten meat to the square / and feed their children with maggots"

21 For the case of the author's own Yoruba culture, see Akinyemi 2004.

(verses 34, 35). This strong image of abject neglect of the future generations and generalized decay condemns the complicit profiteers of the described situation.

We can notice that in the second half of the fifth stanza, the imagery of mobility is being pushed into the background, and the focus shifts to Africa's passiveness (the intellectuals) and complicity (the politicians) that allow for the restructuring of its lands and economies. The sixth stanza brings this shift to full closure. The lament on Africa's passiveness is clearly on the forefront, while, after the formulaic use of the "I don't know why" refrain, the speaker also uses the collective first person plural "we," including themselves in the Pan-African community. The deplored "absence of hot questions" (verse 37) is juxtaposed with "cold-hearted dealers" (verse 38).

Moreover, Africa is allegorized as a "battered woman" (verse 40) who is being begged to "marry her new rapist" (verse 40). Here, Raji refers to a colonial and postcolonial figure of speech: the feminization of Africa was first part of male European rhetoric that constructed Africa as a conquerable space. The allegory has also frequently been used by postcolonial African writers, who re-appropriated it later for the appraisal of African culture or for critical narratives on nation-building. In particular, Raji's use establishes an obvious intertextual link to Ayi Kwei Armah's short prose text "An African Fable" (1968). In this text, a misused allegorical African woman is liberated from her erstwhile torturer only to end up being raped by the man who liberated her. In Armah's piece, the two men figure the imperial nations and the postcolonial regimes that turned to dictatorship shortly after the liberation struggle. In the nutshell of two lyrical verses, Raji prolongs this narrative into the contemporary situation by accusing China of being her latest rapist. Worse, it is the collective African "we" that even begs (verse 39) for her to marry into the next neo-colonial system that, as a rapist, is also imagined as being extremely violent—rape being a form of ultimate humiliation.

The next two lines of stanza 6 make use of the metaphorical field of "light." The poetic voice deplores Africa's "worshipping of the sun" (verse 41). I posit that the sun here is semantically twofold. On the one hand, it is commonly known that the sun rises in the east; thus, it alludes to China's geographical position, yet the worship that might be blinded by the power of the sunlight itself leads to Africa not seeing how "others gather the rays to steal" (42). On the other hand, we can also read the sun as being associated with Africa herself, the rays then figuring the riches of her soil, which are so sought after by foreign powers. In the last two lines, the relative phonetic closeness between "matches" and "marches" is playfully used to underline, once more, the prevailing bewildering ignorance: "I don't know why we watch foreign matches" (verse 43), instead of stirring up a revolutionary spirit that would "ignite marches on blighted streets" (verse 44). Just like "sun" above, "matches" have a double meaning here. Metonymically, they can be read as

a reference to an important African's audience gusto for watching international soccer league matches as a distracting pastime. Metaphorically, they can also be read as matches lighting a fire in the figurative sense: the African collective would, in this sense, prefer to watch the revolutionary *marches* of others instead of organizing their own protests, and this in spite of the "blighted streets," a *pars pro toto* for decaying infrastructure at large. The problem of infrastructure, we may also conclude while reading through, is now delegated to China; but at what cost for Africa in the long run? the poem implicitly asks.

The last two stanzas are very short and serve as a closing frame. Stanza 7 is a short summary of the poetic voice's lament on Africa's silence that is, in the last stanza, finally bound back to the central image of the poem: the train. Stanza 8 is in fact a reprise of stanza 3, thus taking the reader back to the "new train coursing through our lands" (verse 48) and the onomatopoeia that they already know to stand in for the Forum of China African Cooperation. The additional last line, "The new train of the new slavery is up, coming…" brings the fundamental warning of the "Mandarin Song" to full closure.

Clearly, in Remi Raji's "There Is a New Train Coursing through Our Lands," the China Dream is retranslated into a nightmare for Africa; an Africa that seems to be fully under the spell of China's promises of progress and prosperity through its infrastructural interventions. The poem poses as a wake-up call, an appeal to remember Africa's historical wounds in light of today's new world order and to consciously speak out and act against the potential subjugation by a new superpower.

4 Conclusion

In this short essay, I have opened first vistas on the forms and ideas of African literary narratives and poetics that respond to China's dream of economic and cultural expansion. The diversified and growing field of African writing on China's interventions on the continent challenges further systematic research. My focus has been on the close reading of Remi Raji's poem, in which, by use of the central metonym of the train, the Chinese Dream of accomplishing their Belt and Road mega-project threatens to turn into an African nightmare symbolically bound back to the earlier collective African traumas of the transatlantic slave trade and European colonialism. This lyrical appeal to the vigilance of African people when it comes to the potential of a sort of recolonization that is inherent in Chinese Dreams for Africa stems from a strong poetic voice and from an incorruptible pan-African consciousness.

One other sensitive topic I have not touched upon here is the question of mutual racialization and racial bias between Africans and Chinese who turn

themselves to the colonial tropes of Blackness and Yellowness.[22] While literature fictionalizes such bias, for instance, in Kenyan author Ken N. Kamoche's novel *Black Ghosts* (2013) on the discrimination of African students in China (Vasser 2018), writers like the Congolese Henri Lopès[23] and the Kenyan Yvonne Owuor[24] have also complicated and, to some extent, deconstructed race in Sino-African relationships. This points, once more, to the transcendent power of literature.[25]

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Appendix

There is a new train coursing through our lands
(Mandarin song)

By Remi Raji

I have been to the valleys and the hills of these lands.
I have followed the trail of great rivers,
I have supped with kings and cornmoners,
I have seen the entrails of cornplicit rnen and wornen
who till their banks, zip their lips and kill their conscience …
I have also clirnbed rnountains with rnen
who have the_energy but have no voice.

22 Beyond fiction, Roberto Castillo's article on "'Race' and 'racism' in Contemporary Africa–China Relations Research" (2020) opens up an important discussion.

23 See Yoon's chapter on "Racialization and Afro-Chinese Identity" (2023: 157–208) that elaborates on the larger discursive framework around race in African–Chinese writings and then focuses on Lopès' novel *Le lys et le flamboyant* (1997). On China in Lopès writing, see also Gahungu 2021.

24 Her novel *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) traces Sino-East African mixed heritage and contemporary relations in unconventional ways. See Joon 2023, 213–219; Journo 2021 and Daniel Kossmann's close-reading of the novel in the present volume.

25 I would like to thank professor and director Lateef Babatunde Ayeleru for inviting me as an academic guest to the Nigerian Frech Language Village Badagry where this essay was written.

I don't know why
we do not debate the delicate clirnate
and her cunning ways
I don't know why we cannot argue
about the revolution, of the new slavery around us
I don't know why I am asking you if you know.

There is a new train coursing through our lands
FAKA-F1KI FOKO-FAKA FOOO!
FOCO-FACA FACA-F1CI FOOOO!

FOCAC, F-0-C-A-C is the choo choo train,
their silent electric train, the new Amistad,
hoisting the Mayflower flag
frorn Cairo to Cape Town
frorn Kigali to Karnpala
frorn Bujurnbura to Banjul
frorn Lagos to Luanda, to Lilongwe
frorn Harare to Conakry to Nairobi
frorn Abuja to Accra to Addis
frorn Dakar to Dar es Salaam,
frorn Maputo to Marrakech ...

The captains are ready; the drivers legion.
I don't know why the new scrarnble is that fierce
yet unseen, I don't know why the passengers are silent
and dying in these coaches of debt.
I don't know why the court of poets is not alive
I don't know why the conclave of thinkers is in trance,
dead to the comrnon fear aground.
I don't knowwho to believe,
between the political econornists and the econornic politicians,
they who bring the rotten rneat to the square
and feed their children with rnaggots,
I don't know why.

I don't know why we are not serving hot questions
to these cold-hearted dealers,
I don't kriow why we rnust beg
a battered woman to marry her new rapist.
I don't know why we worship the sun still
while others gather the rays to steal.
I don't know why we watch foreign rnatches,
why we don't ignite marches on blighted streets.

I don't know why
we have been too silent,
complicit, silent for too long.

There is a new train coursing through our lands
FAKA-FIKI FOKO-FAKA FOO!
FOCO-FACA FACA-FICI FOOOO!
The new train of the new slavery is up, coming …

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Chapter 5

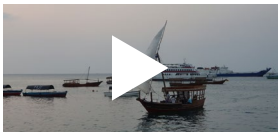
The China Dream in *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor

Daniel Kossmann

1 Introduction

A lot has been talked and written about the China Dream[1] since Xi Jinping brought this term into public discourse in late 2012 (Hartig 2016: 27). Since then, the China Dream has been linked on the one hand to the field of China's domestic politics and on the other to foreign policy projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative, a massive infrastructure project spanning Asia, Europe, and Africa. Hence, it appears rather unclear if the China Dream is meant to be a dream for the Chinese only or if its dreaming also incorporates people, cultures, and nations from abroad. This

1 It is not always clear if one should talk of the "China Dream" or the "Chinese Dream." Both terms are used in scholarly articles. Callahan argues that "[f]or many, the China dream [...] involves tight state control of politics, economy, and society to promote the key values of stability, unity, and statism. Because of this focus on the state, rather than on the people, it is appropriate to translate *zhongguo meng* as 'China Dream' rather than 'Chinese Dream' *(zhonghua meng)*" (Callahan 2014: 150). In this article, I opted to follow Callahan's suggestion.



https://doi.org/10.11588/heidicon/23847848
Podcast "Re:Imagining Worlds: A conversation with Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor" by Kenyan author Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, Daniel Kossmann, John Njenga, and Linda Ammann

Daniel Kossmann, The China Dream in *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019) by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor. In: Jamila Adeli and Linda Ammann (eds.), New Silk Road Narratives: Local Perspectives on Chinese Presence along the Belt and Road Initiative. Heidelberg: Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing, 2024, pp. 131–144. https://doi.org/10.11588/hasp.1370.c19723

brief case study of Kenyan author Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's novel *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019), therefore, aims to shed some light on how the China Dream appears and is being negotiated in African literature in an exemplary manner. In the following sections, I will first provide a short overview of what the China Dream actually means and discuss its domestic and foreign policy dimensions. Thereafter, I will briefly introduce *The Dragonfly Sea* as a novel and, finally, explore how the China Dream is discussed and represented in it. I have chosen *The Dragonfly Sea* as an example for this case study partly because of the author's position as a global public intellectual and partly because of the novel's rather unique position in East African literature with reference to the representation of China.

2 The China Dream

Besides concepts such as a peaceful rise, a peaceful development, and a harmonious world, the China Dream can be considered to be one of the "most relevant conceptual slogans related to China's foreign policy" (Hartig 2016: 16). It partly developed against the background of the so-called China Threat Theory[2] and encompasses particularly the idea of a great renewal of the Chinese nation, an idea that was first brought into official public discourse by Xi Jinping (Callahan 2014: 143, Sørensen 2015: 55; Hartig 2016: 20). "Tracing modern Chinese history from China's humiliating defeat by Great Britain in the mid-19th century, Xi highlighted the 'Chinese dream' as a unifying theme for the Chinese to achieve a great national revival" (Sørensen 2015: 55).

This is one side of the story. But the China Dream can also be understood as a response by Chinese citizen intellectuals "to the narrowing of the meaning of 'harmony' after Hu Jintao proclaimed it as his official slogan in 2004" (Callahan 2014: 156). "[T]he new term […] was vague, aspirational and open-ended. It offered a new narrative of hope that could supplement the older and by now rather tired ideological rhetoric of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics', and it might

2 "The 'China threat' theory maintains that China will use its burgeoning power to destabilize regional security. […] They also dismiss the idea that comprehensive engagement of China, largely through economic partnership, will […] liberalize its political system and incorporate it in the global order as a legitimate, stable, and peaceful force. Instead, […] China's emerging economic strength will give it a position that allows it to do the absolute opposite: threaten peace and security and challenge the US on issues like Taiwan. […] By far the most serious threat China supposedly poses to the US is a military and strategic one: China wishes to replace the US as the dominant power in the region and has embarked on a program of military modernization to reach its goal" (Broomfield 2003: 266).

particularly inspire younger generations who were most interested in the long-term future" (Ferdinand 2016: 944). Callahan stresses in this context that "Xi's China dream was actually a response to discussions within China" (Callahan 2014: 144) and, hence, not an answer to external voices. After Xi's official introduction into political discourse in 2012, he extended the China Dream slogan further. In March 2013, for example, he stated in front of the National People's Congress that to fulfill this great rejuvenation of China, one "'must achieve a rich and powerful country, the revitalization of the nation, and the people's happiness'" (Callahan 2014: 143).

The China Dream is still a new and emerging concept. It is an ongoing "debate about values" (Callahan 2014: 149), one that has not been conclusively discussed yet (Callahan 2014: 148). Liu remarks that the ultimate goal of the China Dream is to reclaim China's status of a great power commensurate with its size (in terms of population, geography, and economy) and historical legacy (Liu 2020: 2). The China Dream, therefore, is not based on the idea "to build something brand new, but to build a future based on the memory of 4,000 years of history" (Liu 2020: 31). According to Guo, "[i]n its current form, Xi's 'China Dream,' is the imagined identity of China as an emergent superpower catching up with the United States not only in economic, political, and military terms but culturally as well" (Guo 2017: 151). Guo further claims that a strong connection between the China Dream and a new form of integrated nationalism in China exists. He identifies "a two-pronged strategy, namely political de-Westernization and cultural re-Sinicization" at the core of Xi's China Dream discourse (Guo 2017: 151).[3]

When comparing the American and the China Dream, one first needs to notice that both are parts of lively conversations that combine culture and politics (Callahan 2014: 151). Both entail many versions, promote different and often contradicting values (Callahan 2014: 154), and basically refer "to specific ideological formulae, couched in dream terminology, that are components of broader, overarching Chinese and American ideologies" (Pena 2015: 278). Whereas the China Dream emphasizes national rejuvenation, common prosperity, and a collective happiness, the American Dream embodies personal liberty, individual success, and

3 Integrated nationalism is, in this sense, "an ideological defense that is designed to counter the influence of 'universal values' detrimental to the CCP's grip on power and to maintain the political identity of the Party and the state. Delegitimizing Western political ideologies is also a way of undermining the discursive and moral advantage of the United States and Western countries over China in ideological debates. Re-Sinicization serves the same purposes and aims more broadly to maintain China's cultural identity, unity, and autonomy so that the revitalized national spirit will at the same time propel the 'China Dream' and manifest national revival" (Guo 2017: 152).

the belief in upward social and economic mobility (Pena 2015: Abstract). Due to its strong national vision, the China Dream as a whole appears to be a "collective ambition" (Liu 2020: 32), whereas the American appears to be an individual one (Liu 2020: 32, Ferdinand 2016: 943). It should be noted here that this distinction seems very similar to the official portrayal of the China Dream by the CCP's Central Propaganda Department, which has portrayed it as the opposite of the American Dream on numerous occasions since 2012 (Callahan 2014: 156).[4]

Although the main context of the China Dream appears to be domestic politics, it nevertheless entails a foreign policy dimension (Hartig 2016: 27); after all, it is also the dream "of restoring China to its traditional place in world affairs" (Ferdinand 2016: 956). Xi himself stressed this point on several occasions, e.g., in 2012, when he linked the China Dream to the usage of national cultural soft power (Liu 2020: 22), or in 2013, when "he noted that the China Dream will benefit not only the people of China, but also the people of other countries" (Hartig 2016: 27). It is no coincidence in this regard that a book such as *The Chinese Dream in Pictures* (2015) also contains a picture of students and teachers of the Confucius Institute of L'Orientale University in Naples, thereby linking Confucius Institutes to the China Dream (Shije 2015: 102).[5] China's image management revolves around emphasizing its ancient and imperial past over modern problems (Joffe 2023: 11). Confucianism, which became a cornerstone of statecraft and education during the Han, Tang, and Song dynasties, is referenced in the name of the Confucius Institute, which is no coincidence in this context (Liu 2020: 129). These dynasties are considered to be "splendid periods of great cultural, intellectual, economic and political achievements […] that the China Dream of national rejuvenation aims to restore" (Liu 2020: 129). Confucius Institutes are thus conceptually and discursively deeply rooted in the China Dream.

This foreign policy dimension of the China Dream also becomes visible in an opinion piece by Wang Yiwei from Renmin University of China for China Global

4 It did so by publishing numerous books and dozens of articles in prominent newspapers and magazines as well as online (Callahan 2014: 156). Sørensen, referring to the CNKI China academic journals database, mentions 8,249 published articles with "China Dream" *(zhōngguó mèng)* by mid-2014 (Sørensen 2015: 55).

5 The caption reads as follows: "The teachers and students of the Confucius Institute of Italy's University of Naples 'L'Orientale' participated in the 2011 China Cultural Year activities, wearing traditional Chinese costumes. The first Confucius Institute was opened on November 21, 2004 in Seoul, South Korea. By September 2014 a total of 465 Confucius Institutes and 713 Confucius classrooms had been opened in 123 countries. Confucius Institutes have become a cultural symbol and a window for China to introduce the Chinese language and Chinese culture to the rest of the world" (Shije 2015: 102).

Television Network (CGTN). In it, he links the China Dream both to the Belt and Road Initiative and to an African Dream and underlines the infrastructure project's mutual benefit for both sides—without clarifying, however, what that African Dream actually is (Yiwei 2018). In this respect, Ferdinand observes that the Chinese administration is aware of the possible emergence of alternative collective dreams, internationally as well as nationally. But since it cannot force other nations and continents to give up their own, potentially conflicting, dreams, it can instead offer them material incentives and appeal to their government's good sense (Ferdinand 2016: 957). The Belt and Road Initiative appears to be a rather strong tool in this sense. It merges other nation's dreams with the China dream. "[I]t really is true that, as is often platitudinously repeated by Chinese commentators, the 'China dream' is, or has to be, the world's 'dream'" (Ferdinand 2016: 957). In the further course of this article, we will see whether and (if so) how an African—more particularly, a Kenyan (Swahili)—Dream is represented in Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*.

3 *The Dragonfly Sea*: A Brief Introduction

Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's second novel, *The Dragonfly Sea*, is a postcolonial and postmodern bildungsroman and family novel, with features of a comprehensive African ecocriticism.[6] Next to books such as *Le lys et le flamboyant* (The Lily and the Flame Tree) (1997) by Henri Lopès, *All Under Heaven* (2004) by Darryl Accone, *Paper Sons and Daughters: Growing Up Chinese in Apartheid South Africa* (2011) by Ufrieda Ho, *The Black Man and His Visa* (2013) by Jean Tardif Lonkog, *Black Ghosts* (2015) by Ken Kamoche, *A Casuality of Power* (2016) by Mukuka Chipanta, and *Gold of Our Fathers* (2016) by Kwei Quartey, it is one of the few examples of contemporary African literature that prominently features Afro-Chinese relations (Harris 2008: 141–142, Odhiambo and Kwanya 2022: 64, Yoon 2023: 4–5, 12–15).

6 Sule Emmanuel Egya describes African ecocriticism as "an ecocriticism that is based on specific natural, cultural and social particularities of the continent—more specifically, those of sub-Saharan Africa[.] […] [I]n theory and practice, this ecocriticism should recognize the commonalities between the natural and human worlds that have been understood to exist in Africa" (Egya 2020: 67). He further elaborates that "an African ecocriticism aiming to analyse depictions of the natural world ought to embrace anthropological, cultural and historical texts paying attention to peoples' spiritual engagements, forms of worship, customs, and the objects embodying them, as well as novels and poems" (Egya 2020: 71). A comprehensive African ecocriticism in this sense also examines representations of landscapes, natural environments, and animals as well as the spiritual and nonspiritual (Egya 2020: 71).

The novel's title can be read as a postcolonial critique of the Indian Ocean's name as well as a proposal for an alternative name that is free of national and cultural references and instead emphasizes the cross-cultural and unifying character of the sea.[7] It is characterized by its density of content, elegant language, a number of intermedial and intertextual references, some form of multilingualism, and an almost mystical approach to nature (Koßmann 2023).

Ayaana, the novel's main character, lives as a semi-orphan on Pate Island, a Kenyan island close to the Somali border. She and her mother are outsiders, outcast from society, but her close relationship with nature helps Ayaana to live on and find equanimity. One day, a group of Chinese envoys arrives at Pate Island. Their mission: to track down the genetic descendants of Chinese sailors who were part of Admiral Zheng He's fleet and were shipwrecked off the coast of Pate in the 14th century and then merged with the local population. Ayaana, who appears to be one of those descendants, is invited to take up her studies at Xiamen University in China. "The descendant" will henceforth embody in public the bilateral relations between China and Kenya. Although she decides to drop her initial studies of traditional Chinese medicine and takes up nautical science instead, Ayaana continues to struggle with her life in China, which is characterized by everyday racism, loneliness, and emotions of loss and ephemerality.

To make things worse, Ayaana falls in love with Koray, a fellow student and offspring of an influential Turkish business family, who rapes her during a trip to Istanbul. With the help of the Chinese consul general's office, Ayaana gets back to China, where she tries to re-establish contact with her former lover Lai Jin. Lai Jin, who was the captain in charge of the ship that first brought Ayaana to China and rescued her after nearly drowning, is now a famous potter and lives in seclusion on one of the Shengsi Islands. The two lovers get involved with one another again, but Ayaana's yearning for Pate Island is too strong, as is her pain about her bonus-father's[8] death. She decides to finish her studies and return to her island, where she is later joined by Lai Jin, who changes his name to Jamal as part of his assimilation process into Pate's Swahili culture. Ayaana and Jamal eventually marry.

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7 Aurélie Journo's article on the oceanic poetics of *The Dragonfly Sea* traces the novel's idea of the "oceanic space as a bridge between the tiny Kenyan island of Pate and huge and tentacular China" (Journo 2021: 71), whose fluidity allows for a decentering of Asia and Africa, China and Pate (Journo 2021: 76–79).

8 A term for parents who go beyond the usual two 'bio-parents'. The term "bonus parents" has a clearly positive connotation and thus distinguishes itself from the common and devaluating term "stepfamilies" used in empirical family sociology. It is explicitly opposed to a deficit orientation and emphasizes the gain, the extra and the more of having more than two parents (Wimbauer 2021: 134–135).

4 The China Dream in *The Dragonfly Sea*

Although *The Dragonfly Sea* does not feature the China Dream as a main component, it nevertheless plays an important role in the novel, sometimes more directly and sometimes less. In the first chapter, we come across a "stranger, a man from Nanjing" (Owuor 2021: 11) who steps off a boat and onto the ground of Pate Island:

> His hands touched the soil. He swallowed air. Here were the rustlings of ghosts. Here was the lonely humming of those who had died far from home and had for too long been neither sought nor remembered. (Owuor 2021: 12)

This stranger, who "honored the needs of the ghost sailors he […] felt were his own" (Owuor 2021: 142), will later be known by the name of Mzee Kitwana Kipifit. His voyage to Pate Island and his life on the island are closely linked to the "appropriated" (Winter 2021: 1390) voyages of Admiral Zheng He, and one might even wonder whether he can be seen, at least partially, as a present-day resurrection of the admiral himself.[9]

> When he was not fishing, he tended to the tombs that he now suspected dated from the Tang dynasty era, not just the Ming. An older legacy. His shadow community. Looking after the tombs allowed him to believe he was atoning for the lost phantoms he had created through his previous work. Another time, another world. […] Life had splintered in Beijing for this man at exactly three o'clock, one Friday afternoon in 1997, Year of the Ox. He was a specialist in sleep deprivation and simulated drowning methods, a fine artists of human pain thresholds. Though he was a good employee, he also accumulated toxins from the melancholy created by his delivery of suffering to others. He was also entrusted with profound secrets he could no longer endure. On that day, a Hui teenager, connected with an offender against the state, was brought to him, and the administration of electricity caused his unintended death. In the tedium of filling out forms to explain yet another fatality in custody that should have been unremarkable, everything short-circuited within the man. He had glanced out of his office window at the autumn foliage and recognized his own ephemerality. In the next instant, as papers fluttered about him, and his black chair twirled on its fulcrum, he fled from his room, howling at his comrades. His retirement plans were expedited, and by that evening his work as an interrogator for the party's *shuanggui* ended. (Owuor 2021: 142–143)

9 "From the 1990s onwards, Zheng He's voyages have been appropriated within China's diplomatic discourse as evidence of a long history of peaceful maritime relations" (Winter 2021: 1390).

As already mentioned, the Tang dynasty, from which the tombs originate according to Mzee Kitwana Kipifit, is one of the dynasties whose glory days the China Dream seeks to bring back. Hence, these tombs stand symbolically for the greatness and splendidness of a historical China, whose seafarers, such as Admiral Zheng He, at least "in China's idealization […] connected Africans with the Chinese, who had not and never would abuse China's might to exploit or colonize Africa in the way Europeans did" (Chan 2019: 60). Liu rightfully notes that the China Dream is not abound building "something brand new, but to build a future based on the memory of 4,000 years of history" (Liu 2020: 31). Interestingly, the grave keeper's background in The Dragonfly Sea is the exact opposite of how China would like to present itself to the world.

As a former brutal torturer responsible for a "broken Hui boy, and […] 118 men and 13 women whose lives he had ripped apart" (Owuor 2021: 144), as a "fine artist of human pain thresholds" (Owuor 2021: 143) and interrogation specialist for the Chinese Communist Party's extralegal and secret internal disciplinary procedures, Mzee Kitwana Kipifit's personal history represents China in terrifying way. His former life can be seen as the personalization of the China Threat Theory. He, who had left China "with a new name […] and dodgy papers" (Owuor 2021: 145), found refuge on Pate Island and changed for the better. Pate Island renamed people like him. "Some tendered false names; Pate did not mind. Names are mere place markers. Their manners alone established their character, and this determined if they should stay or leave" (Owuor 2021: 88). And "Pate Island had seeped into Mzee Kitwana Kipifit's soul" (Owuor 2021: 142). He was allowed to stay and he was even given a local name, a sign of acceptance (Owuor 2021: 85).

If this is a dream, then it is a Pate Dream, not the China Dream. It is a dream of a community and culture, where human beings are judged merely by their manners, their *tabia*[10] and the way they show *heshima*.[11] As the Swahili proverb says: *Heshima kuheshimiana* ("Courtesy is to respect each other") (Center for African Studies, University of Illinois 2023). Ultimately, however, his change in behavior did not help Mzee Kitwana Kipifit. When venturing out to the sea one day to get to know the "citrus-scented song" (Owuor 2021: 445) of the sea, Mzee Kitwana Kipifit, whose "fate was bound" (Owuor 2021: 187) to the island, did not return, but was swallowed by the sea (Owuor 2021: 445, 537, 545). Understanding nature from the perspective of comprehensive African ecocriticism, one needs to notice in this context that "present life is spiritually and materially a product

10 Kiswahili for "habit, character" (Taasisi ya Taaluma za Kiswahili 2014: 458).

11 Kiswahili for "respect, courtesy, reverence, estimation" (Taasisi ya Taaluma za Kiswahili 2014: 164).

of past life, and the source of future life through the process of incarnation. Past life is nature, i.e. spiritual materiality, represented by natural life-forms such as waters" (Egya 2020: 68) and that "[i]n the spiritual dimension […] human hubris is, in most cases, undermined" (Egya 2020: 70). The sea appears in this light as the final judge over Mzee Kitwana Kipifit's life.[12] In this sense, the Pate Dream, as it is presented here, is not only built upon peaceful co-existence of human beings with each other but, more importantly, also on the "connection between physical and spiritual (seen and unseen) entities" (Egya 2020: 68).

During Ayaana and Koray's trip to Istanbul, we encounter the China Dream once again. This time, it is part of their conversations:

> Koray […] started to speak of the news of the day: the implications of the stock-market crash in China, the depressive effects on ordinary people. "*Chao-gu* mentality," he observed. / Ayaana took a deep breath before retorting: "The so-called small people also have a right to their dreams." / Koray watched her. He dipped a finger into his Campari. "Unregulated fantasies that lead to collapse. This is a necessary purging. Fortunately, your China is too big to fail." (Owuor 2021: 407)

Here, Ayaana criticizes the China Dream as a dream that insufficiently includes the dreams of individuals from the Chinese lower classes. Although, as shown above, citizen intellectuals played a role in the emergence of the China Dream, it has been captured and taken over by China's political ruling class, most prominently by Xi Jinping himself. If it ever was, then it certainly is no longer a dream by individuals, but a tightly controlled state ideology (Callahan 2014: 150, Pena 2015: 278). In this context, Ayaana's critique appears to be more than appropriate. This critical perspective on the China Dream does not end here but appears in other parts of the novel as well. When Ayaana visits Lai Jin in his lighthouse in the Shengsi Islands, she compares the China Dream to the aspirations of Koray, her former lover who raped her, and his mother to control her:

> There is a man. His name is Koray. He and his mother have designed a future for me in Turkey. Their imaginings are so vast that they swallow even my fate. Just like China dreaming Kenya […] without our elephants and lions, without our land, without us. (Owuor 2021: 550)

12 In the novel, nature is depicted elsewhere as something one can trade and speak with, which one must ask for forgiveness, and which can offer help and even save a human being, i.e., as a living being (Owuor 2021: 146, 37, 144, 63, 444).

This example illustrates clearly that, in Ayaana's view, neither is China genuinely interested in Kenya, nor is the China Dream a positive one for Kenya. Instead, the Chinese mentality seems to be a selfish do-not-care mentality, a mentality in which there is no room for the needs of flora and fauna, ordinary citizens, the entire environmental cosmos, and a holistic Kenya. It is a future without fate. This already rather strong critique culminates in a long text passage towards the novel's end, when Ayaana speaks to Lai Jin and compares the China Dream with the American one, as the following extensive quote will demonstrate:

> "Have you seen the American salt well? The pit latrines they built?" He smirked. "The goat shelters?" / "Yes," she answered. She continued: "I was young when they came. They landed with noise." She scoffed. "Their dream for us? An unusable well. […] China says she has come back. An 'old friend.' But when she was here before, we also had to pay for that friendship. Now she speaks, not with us on Pate, but to Nairobi, where our destiny is written as if we don't exist." / Stillness. / "We hear China will build a harbor, and ships will come; we hear that an oil pipeline shall cross our land. We hear a city shall emerge from our sea, but first they will close our channel. These are the things we only hear. China does not talk to us." / Lai Jin listened to Ayaana, heartsick for her, for the island, unwilling to lie about assurances. […] "We hear the Admiral Zheng He has emerged from out of time to resume his voyages." A twist of her lips. "Me, though, I desire Pate's dreams." She paused and shook her head, softened her voice: "If they can be retrieved. You see, we have lost even the memory of the name for our seas." […] Ayaana added, "China is here. With all the others – al-Shabaab, everyone else … China is here for China." She shrugged. "What do we do?" / Lai Jin felt, for a moment, the paralyzing weight of insane historical forces and their cacophonic slogans pressing both of them down. / Ayaana dropped the towel and leaned over his neck. […] Her head tilted over him. She crossed her arms over his chest. He held her arms. Her face pressed against his. She added in a whisper, "But maybe, as it approaches us, this earthquake that is 'Zhongguo,' it will do us the honor of recognizing that Pate Island is also the keeper of its graves?" / Lai Jin shivered. (Owuor 2021: 555–556)

Although the American Dream or, better, the American Dream for Kenya appears rather negative and ridiculous here in the form of an unusable salt well and some pit latrines, the China Dream is not depicted any better by Ayaana. For her, it is clear that the inhabitants of Pate Island will have to pay for their friendship with China, as they did in the past. At this point, one might wonder: what kind of friendship is a friendship that is not unconditional? Can it actually be considered to be a real friendship? A few lines later, Ayaana provides the answer herself when making it clear that "China is here for China" (Owuor 2021: 556), i.e., for its own benefit, for its own interests, and not for those of the Wapate, Kenyans, or—speaking more broadly—Africans. She even indirectly compares China to

East Africa's most notorious, brutal and dangerous Islamic terrorist group when saying "China is here. With all the others – al-Shabaab, everyone else" (Owuor 2021: 556). In her comment and gesture—the shrugging of shoulders, the laconic "What do we do?" (Owuor 2021: 556)—one can recognize a partial surrender, a blend of hopelessness and equanimity.

What Ayaana is really interested in is Pate's dreams: the dreams of the island, its nature and inhabitants; the dreams of Pate's cosmology. But it is unclear which form these dreams de facto have and "if they can be retrieved" (Owuor 2021: 556). They may or may not have already been lost. Ayaana's remark can be interpreted not only as a remark on the Pate Dream but as one that questions the idea and existence of the Kenyan (Swahili) and African Dreams as well. Do these kinds of dreams exist? What do they look like? What is their content? How do Kenyans, how do Kenyan Swahili people, how do Africans dream their individual and collective future? How do these dreams behave, how do they react, when encountering the China Dream? Do they cease to exist, or are they spurred on?

Ultimately, there is a chance not only for peaceful coexistence but for a fruitful and close relationship between African nations and China, as Owuor suggests allegorically with the example of the two lovers, Ayaana and Lai Jin. But it is no coincidence that Lai Jin later changes his name to Jamal before marrying Ayaana. China, too, must adapt to African norms and values in order to recognize the validity of African dreams. At the same time, Pate residents need to become conscious of their own individual as well as collective dream(s). Otherwise, they, as well as (transferably speaking) other Swahili people, Kenyans, and Africans might feel "as lost in someone else's big dream" (Owuor 2021: 367) as Ayaana did in China. Ultimately, it remains unclear how severe the impact of the "earthquake that is 'Zhongguo'" (Owuor 2021: 556) will be on Pate Island.

5 Conclusion

Although *The Dragonfly Sea* by Kenyan author Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor does not feature the China Dream as a main component, its role is nevertheless prominent, particularly towards the end of the novel. Through the eyes of its main character Ayaana, the China Dream—and China as a nation—appear in a rather negative light. First, Ayaana depicts the China Dream as a dream of the political elite that neglects the dreams of ordinary citizens. This is in contrast to its official character as a "unifying theme" (Sørensen 2015: 55). With reference to Kenya, she secondly considers the China Dream to be a selfish dream that reflects a Chinese do-not-care mentality and neglects and exploits ordinary Kenyan citizens as well as the Kenyan environment. Not by accident, she compares China

to Korey, a brutal rapist. When comparing the American to the China Dream, Ayaana considers both to be unsuitable for Kenya. The first is ridiculous; the second, a fake friendship. What China really cares about is Chinese interests and benefits, not those of Pate residents, Kenyan citizens, or Africans in general. However, it is becoming clear that this is not a peculiarity of China. It is the same with all other foreign groups arriving at Pate, be they US citizens or Al-Shabaab fighters. Ayaana also depicts China as an earthquake of unknown magnitude. It remains unclear if it is strong enough to bring destruction or if it will pass without major damage. This depiction clearly contradicts the claim "that the China Dream will benefit not only the people of China, but also the people of other countries" (Hartig 2016: 27).

As the novel clearly brings across through the pondering of its protagonist, if China is truly interested in an equal partnership, it must align itself with local Kenyan or other African norms and values to recognize the validity of African dreams. It must be emphasized at this point that, contrary to official Chinese statements such as those by Xi Jinping, there is not (yet) a single African dream. How should there be? How could a single dream express the ambitions, wishes, and hopes of 1.5 billion people spread across 55 countries? One wonders: in which of the more than 2,000 African languages would the dream be dreamed? Simply put, Africa is too culturally and politically diverse to be reduced to a single dream. Rather, dreams exist in plural, both here and elsewhere. Even the Pate Dream, if it really exists, does so. Looking at the China Dream, Pate residents and their fellow Africans must become aware of their own individual and collective dream(s), whether they are called Pate, Swahili, Kenyan, or African Dreams. Otherwise, they run the risk of losing themselves in the dreams of others.

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Part III

Chinese and African Cultural and Language Policy

Chapter 6

Learning Mandarin Chinese in Tanzania

A Study of Tanzanian University Students

Daud Samwel Masanilo and Linda Ammann

1 China–Tanzania Relations, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the Confucius Institute (CI)[1]

The question of when exactly Tanzania joined the BRI cannot readily be answered. According to most of the maps and information available online, Tanzania has been part of the BRI since 2018 (see, for example, greenfdc.org).[2] Other online sources suggest that Tanzania has been at least a pilot country "for China–Africa capacity cooperation" since as early as 2015[3] (i.e., probably assessing the potential of the state to join the BRI). However, Chinese investment in Tanzania has a much longer history than the start of the BRI. Since 1964, Tanzania and China have had intact bilateral relations "and the two countries have undertaken extensive political, economic, military and cultural cooperation" (Jansson et al. 2009: 2, Shangwe 2017: 81). The first plant built in Tanzania by China with Chinese funding was

1 The authors would like to express their gratitude to all study participants. We would further like to thank our reviewers for their helpful comments. Furthermore, we are grateful to Prof. Dr. Chiara Barbieri for her advice on data processing and analysis.

2 Green Finance & Development Center. https://greenfdc.org/belt-and-road-initiative-about/ (accessed 27 Mar. 2023).

3 See, for example, https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/magazines/political-reforms/the-belt-and-road-initiative-and-china-tanzania-relations-2587670 (accessed 27 Mar. 2023).

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the URAFIKI textile mill in 1968.[4] Since then, more and more projects have been launched. Some of these projects were later assigned to the BRI, although they started before its official announcement. The agreement for the construction of the Bagamoyo port, for example, was already signed in 2013,[5] i.e., five years before Tanzania officially joined the BRI.

Regarding cultural exchange programs between Tanzania and China, it seems that they were established much later than the decision to take up bilateral relations. For example, the first Confucius Institute in Tanzania was only opened in 2013 at the University of Dodoma, and the China Cultural Centre Tanzania (according to its website, the only Chinese cultural center in Eastern Africa) was inaugurated in December 2015.[6] However, exchange between Tanzanian and Chinese universities has existed even longer than the bilateral economic and political relations: in 1962, the two countries signed a bilateral agreement on cultural cooperation in the fields of education and culture (cf. Makundi et al. 2017, Shangwe 2017). Jansson et al. (2009: 3) state the following: "In terms of educational assistance, it can be noted that around 600 Tanzanian students have studied in China since bilateral relations were established. In 2008 alone, more than 70 Tanzanian students were selected to pursue studies at Chinese universities." In 2020, there were already more than 4,000 Tanzanian students in China (Kikoko 2020: 628).

A survey conducted by the Afrobarometer in 2014 showed that Tanzanians generally have a positive perception of China's engagement in Tanzania. Taking a closer look at the questions asked, however, the survey reveals that this positive perception primarily concerns the economic engagement of China. In response to the question of which factor contributed to a positive image of China in Tanzania, most study participants referred to economic factors (China's business investment [31 %], the cost of Chinese products [22 %]), but only 2 % said that "an appreciation of the Chinese people, culture and language" was a factor.[7] Although this survey was conducted almost ten years ago, it seems that not much has changed in Tanzanian society regarding the appreciation of Chinese culture. Some Tanzanians still have a negative attitude towards Chinese citizens or even report unpleasant experiences

4 https://china.aiddata.org/projects/60765/ (accessed 11 Sept. 2023).

5 https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/how-chinas-ambitious-belt-and-road-plans-for-east-africa-came-apart/ (accessed 11 Sept. 2023).

6 https://ccctanzania.org/en/about/ (accessed 25 Oct. 2023).

7 Afrobarometer: "Chinese Engagement in Tanzania: Is It Considered Positive or Negative by Tanzanians?" Findings from the Round 6 survey in Tanzania in 2014. https://www.afrobarometer.org/articles/chinese-engagement-tanzania-it-considered-positive-or-negative-tanzanians-2/ (accessed 25 Oct. 2023).

during interaction with them. This is especially interesting since Xi Jinping, the leader of China's ruling party, the CPC, has announced that "people-to-people and cultural exchanges with other countries" as well as the enhancement of China's cultural soft power[8] is an important goal within the implementation of the BRI.

Here, the Confucius Institutes come into play. The CI program was initiated in 2004 by the Chinese state, overseen by Hanban, a unit of the Ministry of Education. Since the CI reform in 2020, CIs have been organized by a government-operated non-governmental organization (GONGO) that is funded and supervised by the Chinese Ministry of Education (Jichang 2022: 1–2). The aim of the CI program is the dissemination and promotion of the Chinese language (Mandarin) and culture. CIs are always based at a university; in order to set up a CI, there needs to be an agreement between a Chinese university and a university in the host country. CIs have a co-directorship (i.e., a Chinese director and a director from the host university) and are co-financed between China and the host country (a 50/50 financing model). In developing countries, however, the host country's part is taken over by CHINA AID, thus making the CI completely financed by the Chinese state.

With the announcement of the BRI in 2013 and the Chinese leadership's focus on fulfilling the Chinese Dream,[9] the CI program was smoothly integrated as an important means of laying the foundations of what Xi Jinping calls people-to-people connectivity[10] and "cultural exchange with other countries, giving prominence to Chinese culture while also drawing on other cultures" in order to improve "the capacity for engaging in international communication so as to tell China's stories well […]"[11] (cf. Adeli and Ammann in this volume).

The aim of the present study was, thus, to look at the Tanzanian "recipients" of what we could call China's "language and culture capacity building program" with the goal of facilitating China's communication with the world. How do Tanzanian students learning Chinese perceive the situation of learning Chinese in Tanzania? What is their motivation to learn Chinese? Does learning Chinese help these Tanzanian students to better understand Chinese culture and to facilitate intercultural communication? That is, does the CI program meet its goal of engaging "in

8 http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf (accessed 11 Sept. 2023).

9 For a more extensive discussion of the Chinese Dream, see Adeli and Ammann in this volume, Section 3.

10 Cf. Adeli and Ammann (in this volume) section 1.2 for a more extensive discussion of people-to-people connectivity.

11 http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf (accessed 11 Sept. 2023).

international communication so as to tell China's stories well; present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China; and enhance our country's cultural soft power"?[12] And how does this lead to "mutual benefit and win–win situation[s]"?[13]

The relation between Tanzania and China in the educational and cultural field has already been subject to several studies, each of which investigated different aspects of it. Xu et al. (2023) investigated the linguistic capital of speaking Chinese among 15 self-funded students from different African countries in China. The authors were interested in the motivation of the students to learn Chinese and in how this linguistic capital influences their identities and imagined futures. Bakari (2022) conducted a small study at two secondary schools in Dar es Salaam in order to investigate how four factors (Motivation and Drive, Experience, Teaching Strategy, Learning Capacity) may influence language learning. The author asked 139 students and teachers to rate the factors on a scale from 1 to 5 and concluded that all four factors are important. Makundi et al.'s (2017) case study examines how scholarships and the training of Tanzanians in China improved human capital in the fields of science, technology, and innovation in Tanzania. The study found that the experience in China was rated largely positive by the Tanzanian trainees, but that "efforts to transfer and apply acquired knowledge have been regularly impeded by structural barriers including cross-cultural communication problems, differences in attitude, and the fact that in several cases Tanzania does not have the capacity to absorb some of the advanced Chinese technologies taught in the courses" (Makundi et al. 2017: 11). Shangwe (2017) investigates the development of China's soft power in Tanzania, concluding that China's popularity in Tanzania is currently mainly based on the economic opportunities it presents. According to Shangwe (2017: 100), "Chinese soft power is still in its infancy" despite its long history, and China needs to invest more in its soft power in order to draw on its resources of culture and political values. Finally, there are a number of studies that investigate specific aspects of culture (and language in particular) in Tanzania–China relations, such as, for example, Mayer (2019), who examines intercultural communication in Chinese-owned organizations, or Sheridan (2018), who studies the greeting culture between Chinese migrants in Tanzania and its implications for the relation between unequally situated actors in the global economy.

12 http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf (accessed 11 Sept. 2023).

13 Xi Jinping, joint written interview with media from three Latin American countries (excerpt), May 2013 http://theory.people.com.cn/n/2013/0619/c40531-21891787.html (accessed 15 Feb. 2023).

Xu et al.'s (2023) and Makundi et al.'s (2017) studies are especially interesting in the context of the present study, since these studies investigate the effectiveness of scholarships and the motivations of Chinese languages learners and trainees at different stages, i.e., while they were already in China or had already returned to Tanzania. The present study concentrates more on the first stage, that is, investigating the motivations and attitudes of Chinese language students in Tanzania. Thus, in the following sections, we first give an overview of the structure of institutions that offer Chinese language classes in Tanzania; in Section 2, we then introduce, describe, and draw conclusions from the study we conducted in Tanzania; and in Section 3, we finally put the present study into perspective and raise some issues and aspects that need further investigation.

2 Learning Chinese in Tanzania

The Chinese language in Tanzania has continued to grow and expand more rapidly since the establishment of the CI at the University of Dodoma, the CI at the University of Dar es Salaam, and the Confucius Classroom (CC) in Zanzibar. Before the establishment of the CI and the CC in Tanzania, there were no schools or institutions that provided Chinese language training for Tanzanians. Only those who went to China to study at a university had the opportunity to learn Chinese. Since the establishment of the CI in Tanzania, the number of Tanzanians learning Chinese has been increasing each year. At present, the number of Chinese language learners in Tanzania is estimated to have reached 20,000.[14] There are Chinese teaching centers in various educational institutions that the CI has opened, and Chinese teachers from China are sent to those centers by the Chinese partner universities to teach Chinese language and culture. For Chinese classes in secondary schools, Tanzanian Chinese teachers are hired by the Tanzanian government.

2.1 Confucius Institute in Dar es Salaam

The University of Dar es Salaam is a public university located in the coastal city of Dar es Salaam. It is the oldest university in Tanzania. The Confucius Institute at the University of Dar es Salaam was officially established on October 9, 2013 under an agreement between the University of Dar es Salaam, the headquarters

14 http://english.scio.gov.cn/internationalexchanges/2022-04/20/content_78175339.htm (accessed 11 Sept. 2023).

of the Confucius Institute (Hanban), and Zhejiang Normal University.[15] As the website of the CI at the University of Dar es Salaam states, the CI was established "to meet Tanzania's growing need of understanding Chinese language, culture, technology and skills and to increase mutual understanding among the peoples of China and Tanzania" and is an important center and link in the relations between Tanzania and China. Many Tanzanians come to the CI to learn not only the Chinese language but also about Chinese culture. In 2017, the CI at the University of Dar es Salaam was awarded the honorary title of "Global Advanced Confucius Institute".[16]

Up until 2019, the CI at the University of Dar es Salaam had established 21 teaching centers in various schools (primary schools, secondary schools, colleges and universities) across the country. In most of these centers, the Chinese language is taught as an elective course, i.e., students from different majors can take a Chinese course as an optional course.

At the CI at the University of Dar es Salaam, the following courses involving Chinese language classes are offered: Bachelor of Arts with Education in Chinese and English, Diploma in Chinese, Elective Chinese Course, and Short Courses.[17]

Despite the great success in the establishment of Chinese teaching centers in schools, colleges, and universities, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected the progress of Chinese language teaching and learning. As of 2020, many Chinese teachers had to leave and return to China because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Only a few Chinese teachers were left in Tanzania, and they continued to work with the local Chinese teachers. From 2022 to the present, the situation has been getting better, and some of the centers that were closed in 2020 have resumed Chinese language classes.

2.2 Other Language Schools for Adults

As mentioned earlier, Chinese language in Tanzania is taught at several universities, including the CI at the University of Dodoma, the CI at the University of Dar es Salaam (CI USDM), the Confucius Classroom at the Muslim University of Morogoro, and the Confucius Classroom at the State University of Zanzibar. Furthermore, the CI USDM has set up several centers at university level. A 2019

15 https://www.udsm.ac.tz/web/index.php/institutes/ci/welcome-to-ci (accessed 11 Sept. 2023).

16 https://m.fx361.com/news/2022/0329/16492444.html (accessed 30 Jul. 2023).

17 https://www.sohu.com/a/313017694_99911507 (accessed 11 Sept. 2023).

newspaper article in the Tanzanian newspaper *The Citizen* listed 10 locations[18] where Chinese could be studied at university level. Four of these centers had to give up teaching Chinese, mainly due to a shortage of teachers caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The remaining six centers actively teaching Chinese are the Dar es Salaam University College of Education (DUCE), the Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy in Dar es Salaam, the Mkwawa University College of Education (MUCE) in Iringa, the Mbeya University of Science and Technology (MUST), the National College of Tourism in Dar es Salaam, and the St. Augustine University (SAUT) in Mwanza.

In the following, we will briefly present three Confucius Institutes and Classrooms as examples of their function as educational institutions and their history.

Confucius Institute at the University of Dodoma

The Confucius Institute at the University of Dodoma (CI UDOM) was officially launched on April 28, 2013. It was the first Confucius Institute to be established in Tanzania under the agreement between the University of Dodoma, Zhengzhou University of Aeronautics, the Chinese International Education Foundation, and the Centre for Language Education and Cooperation.[19]

Since its establishment, CI UDOM has won several awards, including the "Outstanding Contribution Award" issued by the Dodoma Provincial Government and Morogoro Provincial Government and the "Excellent Party Group and Advanced Unit of Public Diplomacy" title awarded by the Chinese embassy in Tanzania. In 2014, the Confucius Institute at the University of Dodoma was awarded the "Global Advanced Confucius Institute" title.[20]

Chinese language teaching at the University of Dodoma is incorporated into the credit teaching management system of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. In 2020, CI UDOM became an independent academic unit, and now it is offering a Bachelor of Arts degree in Chinese Language. The Chinese language is also taught as an elective course for students that are not majoring in Chinese.[21]

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18 https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/supplement/confucius-institute-celebrates-milestone-reached-through-chinese-language-teaching-2677554 (accessed 25 Sept. 2023).

19 https://www.udom.ac.tz/academic_unit/welcome_note?id=VFZSUlBRPT0= (accessed 12 Sept. 2023).

20 http://www.hneaie.com/article/642.html (accessed 12 Sept. 2023).

21 https://www.udom.ac.tz/academic_unit/welcome_note?id=VFZSUlBRPT0= (accessed 12 Sept. 2023).

As an extension of their services, CI UDOM has opened several teaching centers, including Morogoro Muslim University (which is now developed into a Confucius Classroom), Dodoma Secondary School, Viwandani Secondary School, and the College of Business and Economics, to name a few.[22]

Confucius Classroom (CC) at the State University of Zanzibar

The CC was established in 2011 as a collaboration between China Radio International and the Zanzibar Journalism and Mass Media College (ZJMMC). At that time, it was known as the "China Radio International Confucius Classroom." The official opening ceremony of the CC was held on April 2, 2011 at the ZJMMC.[23] This CC was the first to be established in Tanzania, and the ZJMMC was the first institution organizing classes and teaching Chinese to Tanzanians.[24] The CC was renamed the Confucius Classroom at the State University of Zanzibar (CC at SUZA) in 2020 as a result of the merge of the ZJMMC and the State University of Zanzibar (SUZA). Since its establishment, the CC at SUZA has been offering courses in the Chinese language as well as cultural courses and activities. The agreement to conduct the Chinese proficiency test (HSK) at the CC at SUZA, however, was only signed in June 2023.[25]

Confucius Classroom at the Muslim University of Morogoro

As already mentioned above, the CI at the University of Dodoma is responsible for organizing Chinese language classes at both the University of Dodoma and the Muslim University of Morogoro (MUM). Thus, at the MUM, the CI UDOM established a teaching center. In 2015, this teaching center even started offering a bachelor's degree in Languages and Interpretation.[26] The center officially became a Confucius Classroom in July 2019. By the end of 2019, there were a total of 1,500 students that were learning Chinese, and about 70 of them received scholarships from the Confucius Institute to study in China. In 2022, the CC at the MUM only counted

22 https://m.fx361.com/news/2022/0329/16492444.html (accessed 12 Sept. 2023).

23 https://www.chinanews.com.cn/hwjy/2011/04-06/2954110.shtml (accessed 12 Sept. 2023).

24 http://swahili.cri.cn/141/2011/04/02/1s104113.htm (accessed 12 Sept. 2023).

25 https://www.suza.ac.tz/the-first-board-meeting-of-confucius-classroom-at-the-state-university-of-zanzibar-cc-at-suza-held-on-5th-june-2023-at-the-conference-room-of-south-administrative-building-zhejiang-normal-universi/ (accessed 12 Sept. 2023).

26 https://www.thecitizen.co.tz/tanzania/supplement/confucius-institute-celebrates-milestone-reached-through-chinese-language-teaching-2677554 (accessed 12 Oct. 2023).

380 students.[27] Unfortunately, it is not clear what caused the drop in the number of students (supposedly, an effect of the pandemic and the accompanying shortage of Chinese teachers).

2.3 Chinese in Public Secondary Schools

Chinese is also taught at the secondary school level in both public and private secondary schools. In 2016, six pilot secondary schools were selected to offer Chinese language classes.[28] Since then, the number of secondary schools that offer Chinese language courses has grown significantly. By 2019, there were sixteen secondary schools that offered Chinese language classes and took part in the Chinese national examination.[29] Currently, there are more than 20 secondary schools that offer Chinese language classes in Tanzania. There are also new subject combinations that have been introduced in high school. Two of these subject combinations are language subject combinations, namely, KFC (Kiswahili, French, and Chinese) and KEC (Kiswahili, English, and Chinese). The two combinations are expected to fuel the preparation and production of more competent language experts.[30]

The government of Tanzania has continuously emphasized the importance of foreign language education in its education and training policy.[31] Regarding Chinese language teaching, the Tanzanian government published a "Chinese Language Syllabus for Ordinary and Secondary Education"[32] in 2015 in order to complement the objectives of the Education and Training Policy 2014 and strives to prepare a Chinese curriculum for various levels of education in the country, from the primary school to the college/university level. The Tanzania Institute of Education (TIE) is currently working on the review and development of the Chinese language curriculum for primary school, secondary school (both Ordinary

27 https://m.fx361.com/news/2022/0329/16492444.html (accessed 12 Oct. 2023).

28 https://www.bbc.com/swahili/medianuai/2016/01/160104_chinese_schools_tanzania (accessed 15 Sept. 2023).

29 https://www.eatv.tv/news/current-affairs/tanzania-kufundisha-kichina-shuleni-na-vyuoni (accessed 12 Oct. 2023).

30 https://nukta.co.tz/read/kfc-au-kec:-kuna-maana-gani-serikali-kuanzisha-%E2%80%9Ccombination%E2%80%9D-mpya-kidato-cha-tano.html (accessed 12 Oct. 2023).

31 Tanzania Education and Training Policy, 2014. Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.

32 https://www.tie.go.tz/uploads/files/SYLLABUS%20FOR%20CHINESSE%20LANGUAGE%20(O%27LEVEL).pdf (accessed 11 Sept. 2023).

Level and Advanced Level), and Teaching Colleges. These new ordinary and advanced secondary school curricula stipulate that the Chinese language will be taught as an elective course at the ordinary secondary school level,[33] and for advanced secondary school, it will be a compulsory course.[34]

3 Study in Tanzania

"Language is important for the development of any country in the world."
(Study Participant)

As described in the previous sections, systematic teaching of Mandarin Chinese does not have a long history in Tanzania. While other foreign cultural promotion and language teaching organizations have been around for decades (the Alliance Française, for example, since 1961 and the Goethe Institut since 1962), the CI / CC was only established in 2011 in Zanzibar and in 2013 in mainland Tanzania. However, in terms of popularity amongst Tanzanians, Chinese seems to have already overtaken all other foreign languages taught in the country (except English) (Mutembei, p.c.). Based on these observations, the following questions arise: why is Chinese so popular in Tanzania? What is the motivation of Tanzanians to learn Chinese? And does learning Chinese also help the students in the interaction with Chinese speakers?

In order to answer these questions, we designed a sociolinguistic questionnaire including questions about motivation, learning habits of language and culture, and mutual (cultural) understanding between Chinese speakers in Tanzania and Tanzanians.

In order to assess the functionality of the questionnaire, we ran a short test phase with a version in English in the summer of 2022, where about 30 participants of different classes filled out the questionnaire. Although we generally got good results, some participants had difficulties understanding the questions due to insufficient command of the English language. Therefore, we translated the questionnaire into Swahili. Additionally, we set up an online version of the questionnaire using an app. This way, the questionnaire could easily be shared with potential participants.

33 Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2023). Chinese Language Syllabus for Ordinary Secondary Education Form I–IV. Tanzania Institute of Education.

34 Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2023). Chinese Language Syllabus for Advanced Secondary Education Form V–VI. Tanzania Institute of Education.

The online questionnaire was distributed by Chinese teachers in various student chat groups. The paper version was filled out by students before or after their Chinese language classes. The data were collected between September 2022 and June 2023. They were collected at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), the Confucius Institute of Dar es Salaam (CI), Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy in Dar es Salaam, the Dar es Salaam University College of Education (DUCE), and the Mkwawa University College of Education (MUCE) in Iringa. In total, 40 % of responses were filled in on the app and 60 % on paper.

3.1 Short Description of Study

The questionnaire contained 21 questions. The first six questions gathered some personal information, such as gender, age group, and languages spoken by the study participants (please refer to the appendix to see the exact questions of the questionnaire). Questions 7–20 dealt with the language acquisition of each study participant as well as with their motivation, their personal experiences, and potential influences on their cultural understanding and attitude. Question 21 was an open question, leaving the participant space to comment on anything related to the topic of the questionnaire. In the following section, we discuss the answers to each question in more detail.

3.2 Description and Analysis of Questionnaire Results

Gender and Age Group

In total, we received 117 completed questionnaires. Out of these, only one questionnaire had to be excluded because (as the IP address showed) one participant filled out the online questionnaire twice, giving identical responses. Regarding the gender of the participants, we got 64 males (55 %) and 52 females (45 %) (see Figure 1).

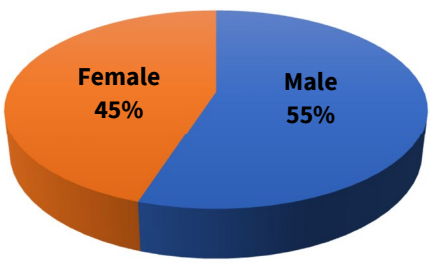

Fig. 1 Gender distribution amongst study participants

86 % of the study participants were between 18 and 25 years old, the remaining 14 % being between 26 and 35 years old.

Other Languages Spoken

Questions 4 and 5 asked for the languages spoken by the participants. 78 % of the participants stated that Swahili was their mother tongue (Question 4). However, this number has to be treated with caution, because it is not clear if Swahili is really the mother tongue or, rather, the language the participants use the most in everyday life. Regarding proficiency in other languages, 81 % stated that they speak English, while only 47 % stated that they actually speak Chinese. It seems as if the remaining 53 % still consider their Chinese proficiency as not being sufficient to state that they actually speak the language, although only 24 % said that they were learning Chinese at a beginner's level. 16 % of the participants speak Swahili as a foreign language, while all other foreign languages listed in Figure 2 are only spoken by one or two individuals.

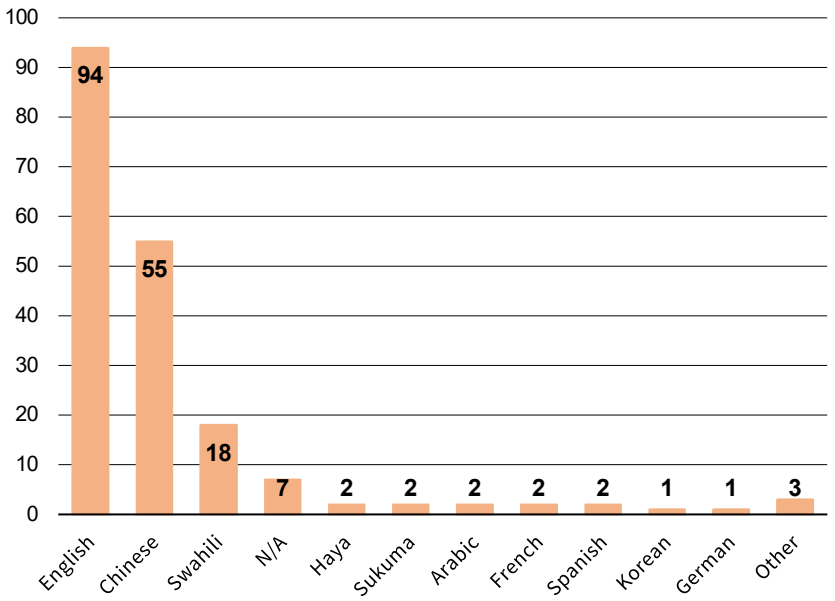

Fig. 2 Other languages spoken by study participants

Motivation to Learn Chinese

Question 7 asked for the motivation of the Tanzanian students to learn Chinese. The question gave eight possible answers as well as space for an open answer (other). Multiple answers were possible. Figure 3 presents the participants' replies. Each bar contains the total number of times the respective answer was chosen by participants.

As Figure 3 shows, the most frequently chosen motivation to learn Chinese, selected by more than half of the participants, is the desire to go to China for a period of time (53 %), followed by the potential need for a future job (44 %). A general interest in Chinese culture and the desire to make new foreign friends were chosen by 33 % and 31 %, respectively.

The results for this question show that the motivation for many study participants lies in a potential future benefit, i.e., learning Chinese is seen as an investment in one's future rather than being of practical need in the present. This is supported by the relatively low numbers of participants saying they need Chinese for their everyday life or at work (22 % and 18 %, respectively).

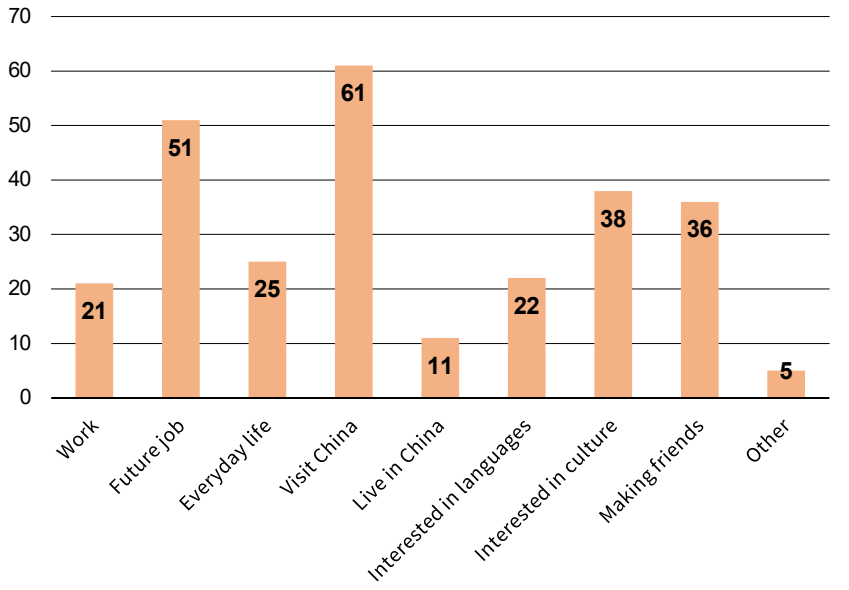

Fig. 3 Motivation of study participants to learn Chinese

Duration and Means of Learning Chinese

Regarding the duration of learning Chinese, there are three almost equally sized groups of beginners (1–3 months, 15 %) and intermediate students (6–9 and 9–12 months; 15 % and 13 %, respectively). There are also two almost equally sized groups of near-beginners and students who have learned Chinese for more than one year (most of these students have been learning for between two and three years—one individual even for six years). Only 2 % of the students said that they had been learning for less than a month.

With respect to the means of learning Chinese, 29 % of the participants used an app or other online tools to learn Chinese in addition to the Chinese classes.

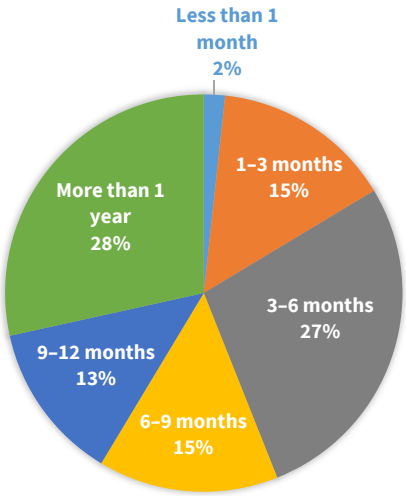

Fig. 4 Duration of study participants' learning of Chinese

Participation in Classes on Chinese Culture and Other Activities at the CI

Questions 12 and 13 aimed to elicit information about whether the participants acquired their knowledge about and understanding of Chinese culture primarily through the Chinese language classes or whether they also attended other classes or activities that focus on Chinese culture.

Figure 5 shows that 57 % of the participants already attended a class on some aspect of Chinese culture, and Figure 6 shows that 64 % joined other activities organized by the CI.

In the questionnaire, we also asked the participants to kindly indicate what the topics of these classes were. This question was not answered as carefully as the one before: only 43 out of the 67 participants saying they attended classes

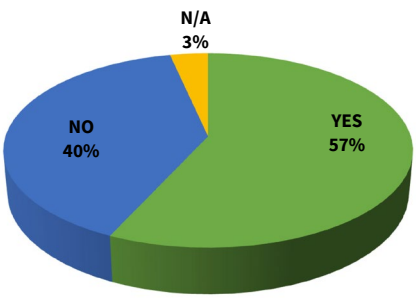

Fig. 5 Attendance of classes on Chinese culture

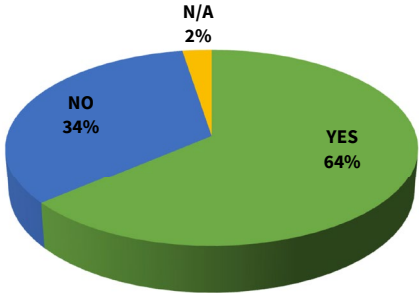

Fig. 6 Attendance of activities organized by the CI

also specified the topic of the class here. The respondents still listed a variety of topics, such as calligraphy, Chinese songs / singing competitions, paper cutting, kung fu, food / cuisine, movies, and Chinese traditional festivals; one participant even mentioned Longquan Celadon.[35]

At the CIs and CCs, classes on culture are usually organized in the form of "Chinese clubs," each club teaching one or more aspects of culture. Some of the classes were also online training courses organized by universities in China.

Question 13 reveals the learners' general interest in attending various activities organized by the Confucius Institute. The results show that 64 % of the students actively participate in the activities and events offered by the CI and CC. Events and activities include the Chinese New Year celebration (Spring Festival), Chinese Bridge competitions,[36] Chinese singing competitions, Chinese clubs, essay writing competitions, calligraphy, speech competitions, kung fu, school opening ceremonies, Chinese Embassy awards, HSK tests, drawing, and summer camp activities. Some of the topics and classes overlap between Questions 12 and 13, which is obviously the case because the CI is teaching classes on cultural issues and, therefore, the participants couldn't decide where to name them.

Finally, it should be noted that participation in competitions seems to be quite popular amongst the students: 27 out of 116 participants have already participated

35 Longquan Celadon is a specific kind of green Chinese ceramic.

36 Chinese Bridge is an international Chinese proficiency competition for foreign students promoted by the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (formerly Hanban). Students learning Chinese from all over the world go to China every year to participate in these competitions. The first prizes are full scholarship to study for a degree program in China (cf. e.g. http://za.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/znjl/Education/200405/t20040520_8069854.htm, accessed 13 Oct. 2023).

in the (pre-)Chinese Bridge competitions,[37] and at least 10 students have participated in other competitions like essay writing, singing, speaking, and calligraphy.

Interaction with Chinese Speakers

Questions 14 to 16 aimed to investigate the interaction of the study participants with Chinese speakers (outside of the classroom) and language use during interaction. As Figure 7 shows, the respondents to this study interact with Chinese speakers with varying frequency. 34 % of the speakers (40 individuals) state that they have daily interactions with Chinese speakers, followed by almost equal numbers of speakers who say that they have contact once a week and never (23 % and 22 %, respectively). 17 % state that they interact with Chinese speakers once a month (8 individuals) or even less (12 individuals). In summary, the results indicate that 40 % of the people surveyed have little or no interactions with Chinese speakers and 58 % of respondents have frequent interactions with Chinese speakers.

Figure 8 shows which language the study participants use when they meet with Chinese speakers: the majority of participants use Chinese and / or English (84 and 77 participants, respectively), and only 25 state that they use Swahili. Note that this question was designed as a multiple-choice question. While 84 seems a large number of participants who use Chinese when interacting with Chinese speakers, 55 of them said they also used English, out of which another 15 also use Swahili. This suggests that, most likely, Chinese learners and Chinese speakers code-switch quite frequently when they interact.

Question 16 asked about the kind of interaction the participants have with Chinese speakers, i.e., work-related, private (meeting friends), while shopping (at the market, for example), or other kind of contact. This question was also designed as a multiple choice. Figure 9 indicates that most of the interactions are private (57 participants, i.e., 51 %). Only 16 participants state that their contacts are work-related, and 20 participants interact with Chinese speakers while shopping. A large number (41 participants) said that they meet Chinese speakers in other contexts including, for example, at restaurants, online / on social media, or at events.

Regarding the topic of interaction with Chinese speakers, we would like to point out that a number of participants may have misread Question 14: while the

37 Chinese Bridge competitions involve giving speeches in Chinese, singing Chinese songs, or other talent shows, such as kung fu. Additionally, there are other events, such as singing competitions, competitions in calligraphy or writing, etc., which are organized separately.

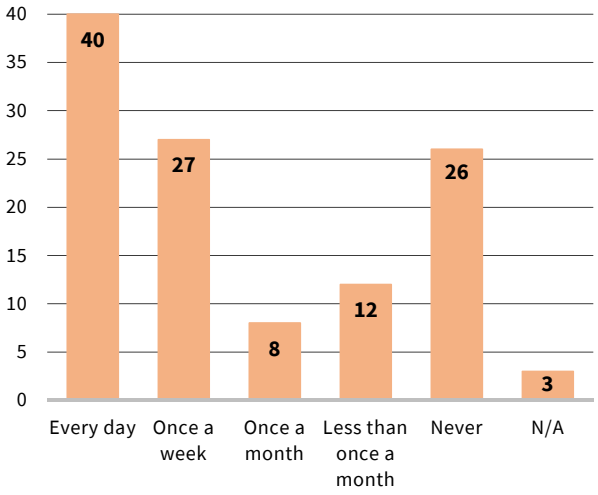

Fig. 7 Study participants' interaction with Chinese speakers outside the classroom

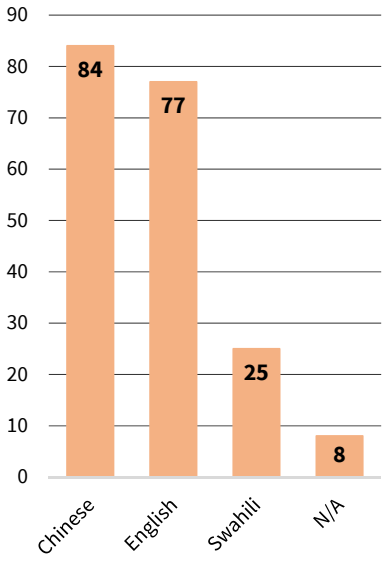

Fig. 8 Language used when interacting with Chinese speakers

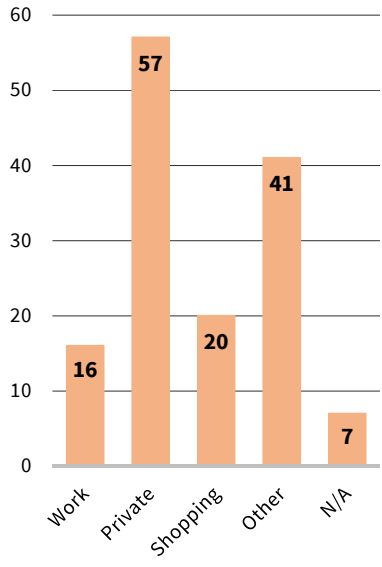

Fig. 9 Kind of interaction the study participants have with Chinese speakers

question explicitly asked for interaction with Chinese speakers *outside* of the classroom, a quite high number still stated that they interacted with Chinese speakers once a week. This suspicion is strengthened by the fact that many participants used the section "other" of Question 16 to state "in class" (17 individuals), and another 10 individuals said that they used Chinese with their fellow students or at the university and CI. In total, these are 23 % that have contact with Chinese speakers in and around their Chinese classes. Certainly, these 27 participants do not exactly correspond to the 27 participants who stated that they have contact once a week; nevertheless, the figures point in this direction.

Preconceptions, Attitude, and Cultural Understanding

The last four questions of the questionnaire aimed to get an impression of whether and how learning Chinese helped the study participants to reduce their prejudices against Chinese speakers. Questions 17 and 18 asked specifically about what the study participants thought about Chinese speakers before and after starting to learn Chinese.

The two graphs show that before starting to learn Chinese, the answers of the study participants were a little bit more evenly distributed over all possibilities. Still, 43 % thought that the Chinese were friendly people, and 66 % thought of the Chinese as technologically developed people.

After starting to learn Chinese, the replies of the study participants concentrate mainly around four possible answers: even more participants think that the Chinese are friendly people (72 %), while the number of participants thinking that the Chinese are technologically developed dropped to 55 %. A reasonable percentage of the participants also think that the Chinese are "generous, kind and loving people" (34 %) and very civilized people (28 %).

In general, it is noticeable that, even before starting to learn Chinese, only a few participants thought negatively about the Chinese. Answers like "Chinese speakers are hard to do business with" or "Chinese speakers come to Africa to take the natural resources and exploit the people" were chosen only by small percentages of participants.

This general positivity is also reflected in Question 19. Here, the participants had to state whether their general attitude towards Chinese speakers had changed due to learning the language and Chinese culture as well as their contact with Chinese speakers. The majority of the participants said that it had not changed because it had always been positive (73 %). Only 22 % percent of the participants stated that their attitude changed, with 19 % changing from bad to good and only 3 % vice versa. Another 3 % said that their attitude had been negative before starting to learn Chinese and is still bad.

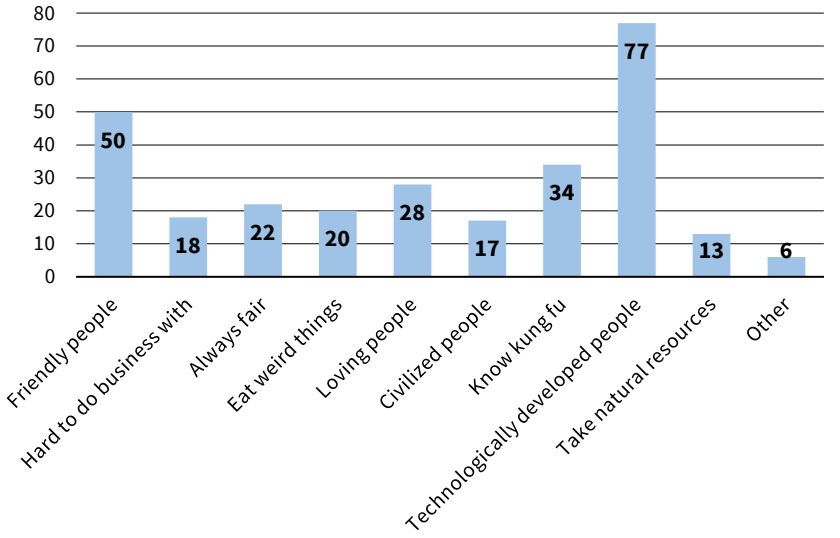

Fig. 10 Thoughts of study participants about Chinese speakers before starting to learn Chinese

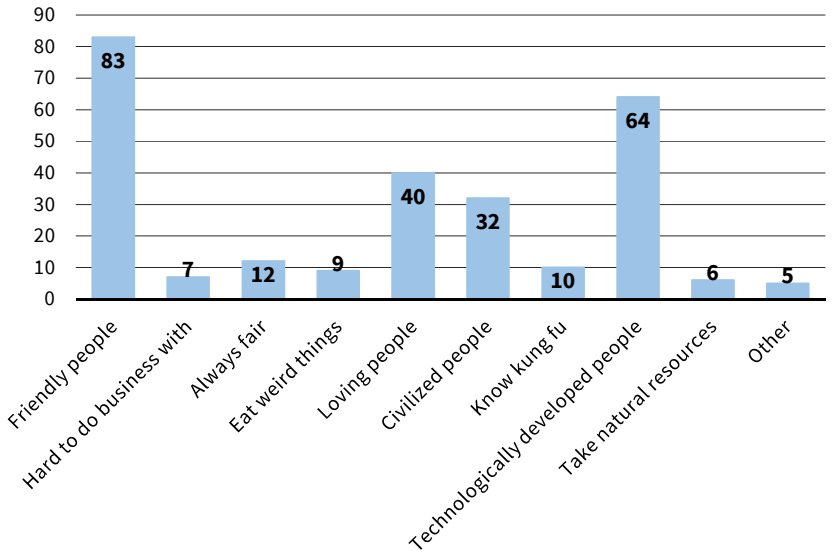

Fig. 11 Thoughts of study participants about Chinese speakers after starting to learn Chinese

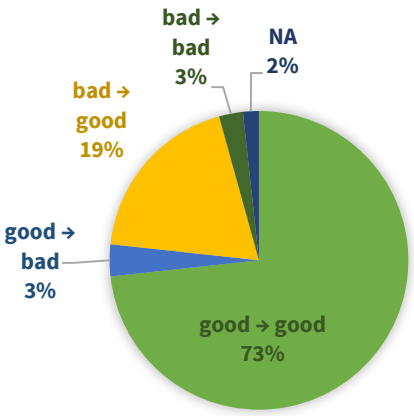

Fig. 12 Attitude of participants towards Chinese speakers before and after learning Chinese

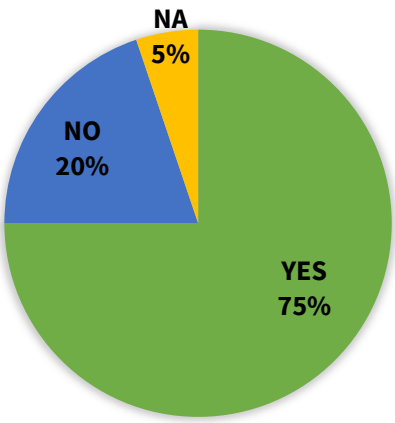

Fig. 13 Increase in cultural understanding

Question 20 finally explicitly asked if the participants had the impression that, through learning Chinese, they developed a better understanding of some of the behaviors of Chinese speakers in Tanzania. Three quarters of the participants answered this question in the affirmative, as Figure 13 shows.

To our surprise, the comment section (Question 21) was heavily used by the study participants, with 91 % leaving a comment. Contentwise, the comments were mainly about the Chinese language, people, and culture in general; the teaching and learning environment; self-reflection in relation to learning Chinese; and the benefits of learning language in general. For a more detailed categorization and discussion of the comments, see Section 3.3.

Finally, we would like to point out that no correlations between any factors asked for in the questionnaire could be found.

3.3 Conclusion Drawn from Study Results

Although the present study is small in terms of participants and institutions covered, there are still some trends and hints we can observe in the answers of the participants.

Generally, it seems that the participants perceive the Chinese language as one that is difficult and that takes a lot of time and dedication to learn. We see this in the replies to Question 5 (other languages spoken), where only 47 % stated that they speak Chinese, while only 24 % said that they were learning Chinese

at a beginner's level. In addition, we received some statements from participants saying that learning Chinese is hard (or the like), for example, "Chinese is a difficult language; alternative ways of teaching it have to be employed." Most participants, however, do not directly comment on whether it is hard or not, but rather say that Chinese is a "good" language (or the like) and that more teachers and training are needed, e.g., "Chinese is a beautiful language that everyone likes to learn, so we would like to ask the Chinese to continue to bring more teachers so that Chinese can continue to spread and people can learn it properly."

The study further showed that, apart from English, which has still the status of an "unofficial second state language," hardly any participant speaks another foreign language (such as Spanish, French, etc.). Only 6 individuals (5 %) speak one or more foreign languages other than English. This is also in line with the fact that few participants are learning Chinese simply because they are interested in learning other languages (19 % of the participants, one of the options chosen in the multiple choice). This means that the majority of the participants chose to learn Chinese specifically (and decided against investing time and money in learning French, Arabic, Turkish, etc.). This further matches the motivation of the participants for learning Chinese. As already mentioned in Section 2.2, most of the participants stated that they think they will need Chinese in the future, i.e., either because they want to go to China for a period of time (53 %) or they think they potentially need Chinese for a future job (44 %). Only few participants stated that they currently need Chinese, either at work (18 %) or in their everyday life (22 %). This suggests that, for the majority of study participants, learning Chinese is an investment in their personal future, i.e., it might bring the benefit of finding a job or being able to travel to China. This observation matches with the results of Xu et al.'s (2023) study amongst African students in China, as they conclude that "the students appeared to have internalized neoliberal discourses in the wider socio-political context ascribing to 'the enterprising self'" (du Gay 1996), where they perceive the linguistic capital of Chinese as integral to future employability and gaining prestige.

This result is not surprising, since the CI is known for advertising potential scholarships and regularly organizes competitions (open to the public) where students can sometimes even win scholarships.

The study further suggests that, for the majority of participants, learning the Chinese language is connected to a general interest in Chinese culture, since 57 % are also taking classes on culture. Furthermore, 64 % stated that they also participate in other activities and classes organized by the CI, such as competitions and festivities. This suggests that, once students decide to attend a Chinese language course, they are also generally interested in learning more about Chinese culture and are more likely to invest time and money in further classes.

Question 15, on the choice of language during interaction with Chinese speakers, showed that these interactions may provide chances for learners to practice their language skills. 72 % of the participants use Chinese in their interactions with Chinese speakers. This does not mean that these participants only use Chinese in the interaction, as we have seen in the discussion of Figure 8 above. 57 % of the participants said that they use more than one language when interacting with Chinese speakers. 36 % stated that they use only one language (either Chinese, English, or Swahili). 21 % of all participants use Chinese only. Of the three languages, Swahili is the least used language in interactions with Chinese speakers (25 participants), and only two participants stated that they use only Swahili in the interaction with Chinese speakers (both of them Chinese beginners).

The answers given to the questions dealing with preconceptions and attitude (17–20) suggest that, most likely, the majority of students who decided to start learning Chinese generally already have a positive attitude towards Chinese speakers and the Chinese culture.

Finally, the comment section of the questionnaire showed that the study participants have strong opinions about the usage and function of the Chinese language in Tanzania. Overall, the comments are very positive. They reflect on potentials and opportunities that arise through the usage of the Chinese language for them as well as for the state of Tanzania, and some even give recommendations to "the Chinese," the CI, or the Tanzanian government.

1) "Chinese is one of the fastest growing languages. It is growing in different countries, especially in African countries, this is due to the great need of people to know this language. And another reason for people to learn Chinese is the opportunities available to those who learn this language."
2) "Chinese speakers are great people who like to do business with other people, so we should keep learning Chinese in order to stay connected to the business opportunities that they can bring."
3) "I would like to give an advice to Chinese speakers to be diligent in spreading and promoting the Chinese language in the world so that it can become one of the international languages in all economic, political, social and cultural aspects."
4) "With the aim of increasing Chinese speakers in Tanzania, Chinese institutions should provide funding for people to go to China to learn Chinese in order to increase Chinese teachers in Tanzania, and students should learn more practically to develop a greater understanding of the Chinese language."
5) "They have done very well, but they should continue to spread Chinese so that those who do not know it get the opportunity to learn it and also Chinese speakers should learn Swahili."

Some participants even seem to almost "glorify" the Chinese language and people, seeing "the Chinese" as obviously superior (i.e., bringing money, job opportunities, scholarships, good behavior, etc.). This leads to the downright grotesque situation of the participants demanding things from "the Chinese" or the CI (as can be seen, e.g., in 4) above or in 10) and 11) below).

6) "I love Chinese people."
7) "I wish the Chinese language would be a universal language and have more speakers."
8) "Keep teaching Chinese language in Tanzania, we love it."
9) "Chinese is a very good language, it should be given priority like Kiswahili in Tanzania."
10) "I would like the Chinese to provide us with better ways / facilities to learn Chinese, for example using a computer."
11) "We ask for scholarships for those who do the best."
12) "Chinese speakers are great people who like to do business with other people, so we should keep learning Chinese in order to stay connected to the business opportunities that they can bring."
13) "Learning the Chinese language requires time, patience and dedication. Along with this, if you manage to live with the Chinese, you can be a changed person in terms of how you work, because the Chinese are very careful in their work. Thank you."

Others, however, are more critical or even share their concerns about the Chinese presence in the country or negative experiences they had.

14) "The Chinese are discriminating, exploitative, cunning (that is, the Chinese can be very tricky—for example, you can agree on something and suddenly change on the next day, they can sign a contract and go on to not fulfil all the terms of the contract), they do not value our education."
15) "Some Chinese can easily get angry."
16) "Even though the Chinese are good people, there are still some Chinese who are thieves to the extent that they have decided to focus on the issues of online money theft, fraud and even other bad behaviors that are not good to emulate in our society. I would suggest that they stop doing it because it continues to tarnish the good image of the good Chinese people in Tanzania."

Regarding these mainly positive opinions of study participants, we need to keep in mind that certainly and naturally, the participants were "biased." All of them

chose to learn Chinese voluntarily, pay for their classes, and were actually sitting at the CI/CC when filling in the questionnaire (at least, the ones who filled it in on paper), before or after their class. While this is certainly a reason leading to overly positive results, there is still a noticeable trend of being extremely uncritical towards the whole situation and setting of learning Chinese in Tanzania.

4 Reflections and Outlook

> *"When I see the Chinese can speak Kiswahili it makes me very happy and when they see us speaking Chinese it gives them comfort. Therefore, knowing their language has made it very easy to be friends with the Chinese."*
> (Study Participant)

The study has clearly shown that, overall, Chinese language learners in Tanzania have a positive attitude towards Chinese speakers. Especially the comments show in an interesting way that the participants seem to readily adapt the Chinese culture and values (such as being punctual, hard-working, etc.) as well as rules enacted by the Chinese teachers/staff or superiors at work. The following example (as well as Example 13 above) indicated this well: "I have learned that Chinese people do not like to be mistreated and lied to, in order to live well with them you have to be honest and understanding as well." As already mentioned above in Section 2.3, however, Chinese language students are a clearly positively biased group and not representative of the entire Tanzanian population. The study participants chose to learn Chinese and, therefore, most likely already had a positive attitude and expectation before starting to learn the language. They are additionally likely to spend time in the "Chinese-friendly" environment of the CI/CC.

This is supported by an Afrobarometer survey conducted in 2019–2021 in 34 African countries, showing that "seven in 10 Africans (69 %) say English is the most important international language for young people to learn. Only 3 % prefer Chinese" (Sanny and Selormey 2021: 2).

With China being the most important source for incoming investment into Tanzania since 2016,[38] it can be expected that the settlement of Chinese companies in Tanzania will increase and, with it, the need for more Tanzanians with a good proficiency in Chinese.

The results of the questionnaire further show that the study participants reflect upon themselves learning Chinese and have clear ideas about improvements to

38 https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-investment-climate-statements/tanzania/ (accessed 26 Oct. 2023).

the teaching and learning environment (e.g., computer-/online-based learning, expansion of study program/lessons, provision of stipends, etc.). In order to be able to improve the offers for studying Chinese and to get more students, the decision-makers of the CI program and the government of Tanzania would be well advised to include students' ideas and opinions in the revision of the programs they offer. "Doing research is good but it should not end only in magazines, something should be done to promote Chinese language […]." However, it is also striking that, apparently, only very few participants see themselves in an active role when it comes to helping to shape the learning environment. This is certainly due to structural reasons at the institutions (and potentially even at the level of the Tanzanian government) but also to the general perception of the Chinese state and its representatives as being economically and politically superior and more powerful. This leads to the participants mainly demanding things, such as:

> "*Chinese speakers should continue to prepare a good environment for teaching and spreading their culture in other countries through organizing various events/activities (i.e. cultural events, concerts)*" or
>
> "*I have benefited from Chinese, so Chinese speakers should continue to bring their programs so that others can benefit as I have benefited*" or
>
> "*They should provide many scholarship opportunities and should design various ways to attract more people to learn Chinese language and culture.*"

Taking the above-mentioned (Section 1) quote of Xi Jinping into consideration (along with numerous similar statements by Xi in his speeches), it is clear that agency[39] and participation of local actors is not the primary intention of the establishment of Chinese language and culture classes in Tanzania. At higher levels, however, there seems to be room for agency and the possibility to change structures towards more mutuality. For example, the CI UDSM requires all Chinese staff coming to Tanzania to learn Swahili (Prof. Aldin Mutembei, video posted on the CGTN Africa YouTube channel[40]) and uses locally produced coursebooks in

39 "Agency is the ability of the individual to influence structure, more precisely as the ability of actors to implement their will to act within their context and to shape their context (Giddens 1979: 55). It is hence the exercise of power to enable transformation (Giddens 1979: 55), and therefore it constitutes or changes structures" (Adeli and Ammann in this volume). For more discussion of cultural agency in connection with people-to-people connectivity, see Adeli and Ammann in this volume, section 1.2.

40 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eRzsCElalaE (accessed 29 Oct. 2023).

Swahili to teach Chinese. Such important advances towards more symmetrical relations and ownership depend, however, on the commitment of decision-makers.

The data generally seem to suggest that at least the CIs and CCs fulfil their role in strengthening people-to-people connectivity and cultural exchange as well as building up their own soft power and shaping the representation of China in Tanzania. However, scholars such as, for example, Bodomo critically note that the relation between the African continent and China is asymmetrical, not only in respect to their economic and financial power but also on the level of culture and cultural diplomacy (cf. Bodomo 2009; Bodomo et al., Chapter 7 of this volume, and the interview with Bodomo, Chapter 8).

Since this study only includes 116 participants from five institutions, mainly in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, it is quite unlikely that the results and trends can be readily transferred to other African countries. Other countries have different cultures, histories, and experiences so that people may react completely differently to the Chinese presence and the claim to cultural superiority. Chinese investment, however, seems to be generally welcomed by all African states and their citizens (cf. e.g. Afrobarometer "How popular is China in Africa? Survey sheds light on what ordinary people think"[41]).

Due to its aforementioned restricted scope, this study can only be seen as a pilot study. More research is needed on the motivation of students to learn Chinese and effects that the expansion of the population's linguistic competence in Chinese has. Furthermore, research should ideally help to reveal new paths that lead to more mutuality and symmetry in cultural exchange in general and in Tanzania–China relations specifically. Therefore, we also need to investigate Chinese citizens who are learning Swahili in Tanzania (or who have learned Swahili already before coming to Tanzania).

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41 https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/how-popular-is-china-in-africa-new-survey-sheds-light-on-what-ordinary-people-think/ (accessed 26 Oct. 2023).

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Appendix

Questionnaire (English version) used in the present study

Questionnaire No:

1. Your gender:

2. Your nationality:

3. Your age group:
☐ 18-25 ☐ 26-35 ☐ 36-45 ☐ 46-55 ☐ 56-65 ☐ older than 65

4. Your native language:

5. Which other languages do you speak?
_____

6. If your native language is not Swahili, indicate your level of proficiency in Swahili:
☐ near mother tongue
☐ fluent
☐ good proficiency
☐ medium
☐ other

7. What is your motivation to learn Chinese? (multiple answers possible)
☐ I need Chinese for my work.
☐ I think I will need Chinese for my future job.
☐ I need Chinese in my everyday-life (for example, while shopping)
☐ I want to go to China for a period of time (internship, study at the university, etc.).
☐ I want to live in China.
☐ I am just in general interested in learning languages.
☐ I am interested in the Chinese culture.
☐ I want to make foreign friends.
☐ other _____

8. How long have you been learning Chinese?
☐ less than one month ☐ 6-9 months
☐ 1-3 months ☐ 9-12 months
☐ 3-6 months ☐ other _____

9. How have you been learning Chinese?
☐ taking classes at the Confucius Institute
☐ taking classes at a university
☐ taking classes at a private school
☐ using an app (for example Duolingo)
☐ taking private classes
☐ other _____

10. How many courses of Chinese have you taken?
_____

11. What is your level in Chinese?
☐ near native proficiency
☐ fluent
☐ good proficiency
☐ medium
☐ beginner

12 Do you also take any kind of classes on Chinese culture?
☐ no ☐ yes
if yes: please name some of the topics of the classes and state, in which institution you take them.
_____
_____

13. Do you join activities in the Confucius Institute?
☐ no ☐ yes
if yes: please name some of the activities.
_____

14. How often do you interact with Chinese speakers outside the class room?
☐ every day
☐ once a week
☐ once a month
☐ less than once a month
☐ never

15. Which language do you use when interacting with Chinese speakers?
☐ Chinese ☐ English ☐ Swahili ☐ other: _____

16. What kind of interaction do you have with Chinese speakers?
☐ work-related ☐ private (friendship) ☐ while shopping
☐ other _____

17. What did you think about Chinese speakers and their behaviour before learning Chinese?
(multiple answers possible)
☐ Chinese speakers are very friendly people.
☐ Chinese speakers are hard to do business with.
☐ Chinese speakers are very social and always fair.
☐ Chinese speakers eat weird things, such as tadpoles.
☐ Chinese speakers are generous, kind and loving people.
☐ Chinese speakers come to Africa to take the natural resources and exploit the people.
☐ Chinese speakers are very civilized people.
☐ All Chinese speakers can do martial arts (kung fu).
☐ Chinese speakers eat snakes and are dirty.
☐ Chinese speakers are technologically developed people.
☐ other _____

18. What do you think about Chinese speakers today? (multiple answers possible)
☐ Chinese speakers are very friendly people.
☐ Chinese speakers are hard to do business with.
☐ Chinese speakers are very social and always fair.
☐ Chinese speakers eat weird things, such as tadpoles.
☐ Chinese speakers are generous, kind and loving people.
☐ Chinese speakers come to Africa to take the natural resources and exploit the people.
☐ Chinese speakers are very civilized people.
☐ All Chinese speakers can do martial arts (kung fu).
☐ Chinese speakers eat snakes and are dirty.
☐ Chinese speakers are technologically developed people.
☐ other _____

19. Do you think your attitude towards Chinese speakers / the Chinese culture has changed since you started learning Chinese?
☐ No, it has always been positive and it still is positive.
☐ No, it has always been negative and it still is negative.
☐ Yes, it has been negative and now it is positive.
☐ Yes, it has been positive and now it is negative.

20. Do you have the impression that through learning Chinese you developed a better understanding for some of the behaviours of Chinese speakers in Tanzania?
☐ no ☐ yes
if yes: please indicate, what kind of behaviours you are thinking of.
_____

21. Anything else you want to tell us related to the topic of this questionnaire?
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Thank you for your help and participation!

Chapter 7

Confucius Institutes and the Promotion of Chinese Language and Culture

A Case Study

Adams Bodomo, Cliff Mboya, and Bright Nkrumah

1 Introduction[1]

This chapter seeks to evaluate the presence and actual impact of the Confucius Institute (CI) in Africa, with a case study of one of them stationed at the University of Ghana. Over the last three decades, the economic reforms in China have contributed to its meteoric rise to become one of the fastest growing economies in the world (Benewick and Donald 2009). The rise of China has received a lot of international media attention (Li Zhang 2010). Its global image has previously been weak owing to negative Western and global media coverage and a lack of a global understanding of its political system and culture. Promoting its global image is also strategic in propelling it to its desired global status as a peaceful and responsible power (Medeiros 2009). The media depicts China as an economic and military power, which qualifies it to challenge the existing global order (Shin and Eisenman

1 The authors thank all who played major roles in facilitating our research. These include members of the Education Pillar of the Afro-Sino Centre for International Relations (ASCIR), Accra, where there is an ongoing project to evaluate CIs in Africa. We are grateful to the staff and students of the CIUG who took great interest in our research. The first author thanks Prof. Clement Appah, who invited him to the CI Open Day in April 2023. Prof. Appah subsequently became the Ghanaian director of the CI. We are also grateful to two reviewers of this chapter. While we did not always agree with some of their suggestions, many others were very useful in helping us address some loose ends in this chapter. We thank the editors of the book for this great initiative to do a monograph on New Silk Road narratives.

Adams Bodomo, Cliff Mboya, and Bright Nkrumah, Confucius Institutes and the Promotion of Chinese Language and Culture: A Case Study. In: Jamila Adeli and Linda Ammann (eds.), New Silk Road Narratives: Local Perspectives on Chinese Presence along the Belt and Road Initiative. Heidelberg: Heidelberg Asian Studies Publishing, 2024, pp. 179–192.
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2012). The rise of China's economic power has increased its political influence in many parts of the world, particularly Africa (Wu 2016). With this rise, China has increasingly acknowledged its position as a global power with a need to rethink and remake its image in the international system. The establishment of Confucius Institutes (CIs) (kǒngzǐxuéyuàn) in various countries (Xiaolin 2008) is one of the routes through which China has been promoting its global image. Expectedly, CIs have been the subject of critical scholarly engagement, especially in Africa, where such Chinese cultural institutes have been established in recent years. However, available evidence-based studies on CIs in Africa and their impacts are limited and non-exhaustive (Li 2021). In this chapter, we address this lacuna by doing a case study of the Confucius Institute at the University of Ghana, Legon, Accra, Ghana (CIUG).

The establishment of CIs is a growing part of China's economic and political presence around the world. The first Confucius Institute in Africa was established at the University of Nairobi, Kenya in 2005 (Wheeler 2013). Since then, CIs have surfaced in countries across every region of the African continent. Specifically, countries such as South Africa, Ethiopia, Egypt, Cameroon, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Morocco have Confucius Institutes in their institutions of higher learning (Procopio 2015). These CIs are an aspect of what the Forum on Africa–China Cooperation (FOCAC) described as "cooperation in the field of development." The objectives of the Institutes were aimed at enhancing the overall goals of FOCAC, which seeks to not only enhance cooperation in the medical and tourism sectors and ensure environmental protection but to also contribute towards educational cooperation for the development of human resources, science and technology exchange, and exchange in academia (Bodomo 2020).

However, there is a school of thought that is skeptical of CIs. Critical voices argue that the CIs are a tool used by the Chinese government to spread propaganda in the world under the guise of teaching (Hubbert 2019). There are also concerns that the CIs are avenues and channels used by the Chinese government to curtail the freedom of speech on campus and spy on students (Jakhar 2019). Put differently, CIs are criticized as operating as an intelligence-gathering agency, as opposed to being a body used to teach and advance cultural exchanges. Moreover, there are concerns that topics such as Taiwan, Tiananmen, and Tibet are not covered in CIs, which leads one to assume that China is using the Institutes to suppress knowledge and freedoms of thought and speech (China: Government Threats to Academic Freedom Abroad 2019). According to Human Rights Watch, "Confucius Institutes are extensions of the Chinese government that censor certain topics and perspectives in course materials on political grounds, and use hiring practices that take political loyalty into consideration." Because of these concerns, CIs have been closed in some parts of the world, mostly in more developed countries, with investigations going on in Australia and Japan to determine whether the Institutes

broke the law or constitute a threat to national sovereignty and security (Taiwan News 2019; Kawasima 2021).

In Africa, however, the increase in critical views around CIs has not led to any cases of closure. A key finding for the resilience of CIs in Africa may perhaps be linked to their impacts at the local level. For instance, CIs in different African countries have contributed to human resource development through training and the awarding of scholarships to young Africans. The Institutes have also been shown to facilitate educational collaboration and cooperation between universities in African countries and China (Hartig 2012). Additionally, CIs have provided employment opportunities for Africans with Mandarin-speaking skills (Wheeler 2014; KICD 2021). Our case study demonstrates some of the impacts of CIs mentioned here.

2 The Role of Confucius Institutes

Language is an important aspect of culture. Just like any other country, China has used its language as an important tool of foreign policy. Since the late 1990s, the government of China has popularized the Chinese language and culture in many parts of the African continent. The promotion and popularization of the Chinese language are geared towards enhancing the friendship and the economic and cultural cooperation between China and many African states. The use of language by China as a tool of foreign policy became clearer in 2004, when the China National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (Hanban) launched the Confucius Institute (Chew 2007). The Confucius Institute defines itself as a non-profit organization to promote culture and the Chinese language. According to the Hanban, the primary objective for establishing the CIs is "meeting the demands of foreign Chinese learners and contributing to the development of multiculturalism and the building of a harmonious world." Many people see CIs as the Chinese version of the British Council, Goethe Institute, Instituto Cervantes, and Alliance Française. However, Hartig (2018) posits that CIs are not equivalent to the institutes from Europe, since they differ in many aspects, particularly in their organizational form. China wholly operates the CIs. They are quasi-state actors acting separately from the formal state hierarchy on behalf of the state but with full government support. They usually serve the state interests and are subject to state regulation and control. This is because locally run offices receive their licenses from China, and the local partners act as joint ventures. It is, of course, still possible to compare the CI and these European institutes, since they all have as a remit the advancement of the languages and cultures of their respective governments / countries.

Since their establishment, CIs have grown exponentially and spread widely in Africa. According to Akhtaruzza, Berg, and Lien (2017), Africa has 46 CIs in 32 countries out of the 54 countries that make up the continent. The authors stated that South Africa and Kenya have the most, with five and four CIs, respectively; and Tanzania, Ghana, Egypt, Madagascar, Nigeria, Morocco, and Ethiopia are among the African countries with two CIs. However, the education cooperation between Africa and China did not begin after the establishment of CIs. Africa–China educational cooperation started back in the mid-20th century, when most post-colonial African countries established bilateral trade agreements with China. Such cooperation increased in 2000, when FOCAC was established. The emergence of CIs, therefore, is based on pre-21st-century educational cooperation between Africa and China, which was aimed at the exchange of resources, knowledge, and technology. Indeed, CIs have been noted to impact positively in African countries where they are established.

The Confucius Institute's declared mission is "to strengthen the understanding, opportunities and bonds between individuals, enterprises, communities and institutions in their home country with the People's Republic of China." They do this by forging strategic alliances with business, industry, government, and other institutions with an interest in forging closer and more productive ties with China. Apart from teaching Chinese language and culture, they work with academic faculties and students to promote awareness and sound knowledge of China as well as developing programs to promote research about China within local universities (Ding 2008). Therefore, long-term relationship building has been stated as a key goal, with the understanding that friendship and the need to constantly create new fields of cooperation are necessary for stable partnership.

CIs in Africa do not only specialize in language and culture promotion but have worked on various technical cooperative projects with partner universities in China. For instance, in Kenya, where four Confucius Institutes and four Confucius classrooms are hosted, each partner university serves a unique function. For example, the Confucius Institute at the University of Nairobi (CIUON), established in 2005 in collaboration with Tianjin Normal University, focuses on state-to-state departments owing to its reputation of producing top government officials and a network of alumni in important strategic sectors, both in government and the private sector. CIUON has conducted short-term Chinese training courses for the Kenyan immigration department, Kenya Revenue Authority, and Kenya Airports Authority. It has also conducted short-term training programs for young diplomats at the Foreign Service Academy in Kenya.

The Confucius Institute at Kenyatta University (CIKU) was the second of its kind to be established in Kenya, in 2008, in collaboration with Shangdon Normal University; it specializes in curriculum development due to its reputation in

education and teaching programs and has since developed a Chinese curriculum for primary and secondary schools in Kenya.

The third is the Confucius Institute at Egerton University (CIEU), which was established in 2013 in collaboration with Nanjing Agricultural University. Their relationship is based on the two universities' specialization in agricultural research and development. Practical training by both Chinese and Kenyan experts takes place at the University's large farmland, known as the Agro science park, where they also host the Kenya–China joint laboratory for crop molecular biology, which is open to all students at Egerton University.

The Confucius Institute at Moi University (CIMU) was launched in 2015, making it the fourth in Kenya. It is the first Confucius Institute in the world specializing in textile engineering and fashion design. CIMU was established in collaboration with Shanghai-based Donghua University. Apart from offering training in textile and clothing courses, it also offers Chinese language and culture classes to students, local residents, and workers at the university affiliate textile company, Rivatex.

3 Impact of CIs in Africa

According to a study, "Behind the Rising Chinese Fever in Africa," China has established 61 Confucius Institutes in 46 African countries. The first one was set up in 2005 in Nairobi, Kenya; three others have been established, making a total of four. South Africa, with six Confucius Institutes, has more institutes than any other country in Africa. The study found that "African agency in the CI model is not prioritized by the Chinese." The study argues that, due to lack of oversight, limited input from host African universities, and prioritizing breadth over depth, "CIs fail to create equitable cultural exchanges with African host countries." "CIs do not develop meaningful skills that make African students competitive in the marketplace which is why most aim to go to China: to truly learn. Further, students and faculty members alike express frustration about the collaborative elements of the institutions," according to the study (Sawahel 2023).

Despite the above, we argue in this chapter that there are, indeed, significant impacts from the CIs in Africa. The first major impact of CIs in Africa is the educational training that Africans have undergone. The study focuses on impact from the perspective of capacity development in Africa and employment opportunities created as a result of Mandarin skills acquired and collaboration between Chinese and local actors through the CI. Many African countries have ambitions to achieve economic growth and follow the footsteps of countries such as China and European countries. Still, human resource development continues to be one of the major challenges. As a way of combatting this challenge, African countries have

accepted short-term and long-term training aimed at human resource development and capacity building for Africans. Through CIs and other related educational cooperation, China has supported Africa in science and technology, technical and vocational educational training, and higher education (King 2014). The results of such training have been carrying skills that have improved technological innovation and increased cooperation in agriculture, energy, and other enterprises. Moreover, CIs have enabled the students to go to China for training in information and communications technology (ICT).

A second positive impact of CIs is the number of scholarships awarded to Africans. As part of the training and equipping of Africans with knowledge and skills, many Africans have received scholarships in different fields (Niu 2014). The scholarships have equipped some Africans to build their human resource skills and capital to seize opportunities that lift their countries' economies. Specifically, CIs has enabled many Africans to learn Mandarin, which puts them in a better position to secure scholarships and jobs in Chinese industries.

Further still, CIs have increased cooperation between universities in Africa and China. Some of this educational cooperation has helped to facilitate the donations of teaching facilities and other equipment in African universities. Prestigious African universities in Lagos, Nairobi, Cairo, Makerere, Stellenbosch, Dar es Salaam, and Pretoria have received support and donations. Also, CIs have expanded the opportunities for students in these universities to undertake Chinese language study before proceeding to China for further education. Besides, the establishment of CIs has improved and enhanced the exchange of ideas and research, which promotes higher education in Africa (Hartig 2016).

As mentioned above, CIs have provided employment opportunities for Mandarin-speaking Africans (Wheeler 2014). Our research indicates that, to overcome the language barrier among members of the business community involved in the Afro-Chinese trade in Africa, wisdom demands that the sector employs individuals who have Mandarin language skills. The language skills of a select population of Africans with equal knowledge of local dynamics has created demand for an elite class of workers in many Chinese-owned companies, which rely on these new skilled workers as interpreters and navigators in local communities. Also, in some countries, Mandarin Chinese has been introduced to be taught at High School and Upper Primary levels. For instance, the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) introduced Mandarin Chinese as a subject that students need to study (KICD 2021). The move to incorporate the Mandarin language as one of the standard subjects confirms that China's soft power (Nye 2017) is growing on the African continent.

Despite the impacts of CIs in Africa, as described above, we believe that knowledge of the broad impacts of these Chinese language and culture institutes is quite limited, and more is needed to build on what is available. With CIs gaining ground

in terms of expansion and reach as critical cultural infrastructure in Africa, there is a need to engage critically and in a comprehensive manner with the examination of their impacts on the continent. With this in mind, we did a case study of the CI at the University of Ghana, Legon (CIUG) to see what impact it has through participatory observation.

In terms of methodology, we took a mainly qualitative approach, using participant observation and relying on both primary and secondary data sources. Secondary sources included information from the official website of the CI at the University of Ghana highlighting its programs, partnerships, and impacts. Secondly, in April 2023, two of the authors attended a daylong event at the institution and made personal observations that were used for the assessment of impacts at the local level and beyond. As a third aspect of the methodology, one of the co-authors works at the University of Ghana and is in constant touch with the CI; therefore, his personal observation provided valuable insights on the Institution. Fourthly, in July 2023, two of the authors presented the results of the study at the university and interacted with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including the Chinese director of the Institute, faculty members in the Department of Modern Languages, and students of the CIUG. Lastly, the authors were able to obtain primary data on the rates of employment of graduate and postgraduate students from the CI at the University of Ghana.

4 The CI at the University of Ghana

Information about the CI at the University of Ghana, Legon (CIUG) is listed on its website: https://www.ug.edu.gh/confucius-institute/welcome-to-confucius-institute-university-of-ghana. We notice that it was founded in 2013:

> The University of Ghana, in cooperation with the Zhejiang University of Technology and the Confucius Institute Headquarters in China, established the first Confucius Institute in Ghana in 2013 to promote the teaching and learning of Chinese language and culture in Ghana. Since its formation in 2013, this approximately 10-year old institution … has worked tirelessly by seconding a large number of academics from various universities in China to Ghana for educational cooperation with several educational institutions. Through this cooperation, many Ghanaians in businesses, government agencies, universities, and basic schools have had the opportunity to visit China to study the Chinese language or experience Chinese culture. It has trained thousands of Ghanaian students, thus earning the status of a Global Model Confucius Institute. Thus, while the CIUG is similar in many of its functions to other CIs, it stands out as a Global Model CI, one of the measures used to show how well a particular CI has performed its functions. Currently, the CIUG in cooperation with

> universities, basic schools, and enterprises and beyond has established eight teaching sites and four special Chinese language programs. The scope of the Institute's delivery has radiated from the capital of Accra to its surrounding areas. (CIUG)

From these descriptions, we see that the impact of the institute is not only being felt in the capital city, where it is located, but in other parts of Ghana. As the Institute itself self-assesses, it still strives to:

> Enhance the understanding of the Chinese language and culture among Ghanaians. Strengthen economic, educational, and cultural exchanges and cooperation between China and Ghana. Promote friendly relations between China and Ghana and the multi-cultural development between China and Ghana. (CIUG)

Aiming at a critical assessment of whether the CIUG is delivering on the goals above, we attended a day long activity at the Institute, at their invitation. This activity involved a Chinese language and culture competition by students and graduates of the Institute during an International Chinese Language and Culture Day in April 2023. The activity involved many contestants. Each had to speak Chinese for some minutes before performing a Chinese cultural activity such as kung fu or tai chi. This day long event is further described in detail below.

The CIUG has striven to meet the needs of Ghanaians with regards to learning Chinese language and enhancing the understanding of Chinese culture as well as strengthening economic, educational, and cultural exchanges and cooperation between Ghana and China over the years. As mentioned above, the program was attended by several guests from Chinese enterprises in Ghana, a representative from the Chinese Embassy in Ghana, the registrar of the University of Ghana, several heads of departments at the University of Ghana, heads from some private and international schools in Ghana, and friends of some media houses in Ghana. The program welcomed about 300 spectators. This program featured 19 University of Ghana Chinese language students, who competed and showcased their knowledge and proficiency in the Chinese language as well as their talents and skills in Chinese cultural arts through performances such as singing, dancing, poetry, acting, kung fu, and speeches in Chinese. Each contestant had three minutes to deliver a speech and three to five minutes to perform a cultural act. The panelists rated the contestants, with 100 being a perfect score (the third author of this chapter was one of the judges). The average score of the judges was taken and, per the total score, awards were given. The contestants walked away with several prizes, such as mobile phones, Bluetooth speakers, headphones, power banks, and many more.

The April 2023 observation was followed up by a visit in July 2023, during which we presented our research at a seminar at the University of Ghana Modern Languages Department. We discussed our research with many stakeholders, including lecturers and students. The Director of the CI agreed with many of our findings and suggested that they intend to upscale the activities of the CI by taking it beyond the confines of the capital city, Accra.

Further to all this, we obtained critical data showing employment rates of graduate and postgraduate students from the years 2013 to 2022, as in the table below. This shows that there is a gradual rise in employment, which indicates that the CI not only has a significant impact on its graduates but is also making considerable contributions to the employment sector in the country.

Year	Students Graduated	Further Studies (Postgraduate)	Employment
2013	24	2	22
2014	36	6	30
2015	72	N/A	72
2016	81	14	67
2017	74	4	70
2018	63	8	55
2019	43	7	36
2020	72	4	68
2021	124	18	116
2022	140	7	140

While it is evident that CIUG is delivering on its goals, they are, in the most part, China-focused goals and help deliver Chinese foreign policy goals to a large extent and very little in terms of Ghanaian foreign interests and cultural profile. In the grand scheme of things, China's soft power in Africa is on the rise, and, through language and culture being offered by the CI, it will be able to influence politics and economics in its favor. If it goes unchecked, African countries, including Ghana, may become too dependent and lose their leverage as the asymmetry in the relations widens.

5 Critical Evaluation and Proposals for Improvement

The students appeared to us to have a relatively high level of Chinese language fluency and cultural understanding; this shows that the Institute is fulfilling its functions well. Moreover, data shows that Mandarin skills and human resource development in the form of scholarships, campus recruitment drives, and technical and social cooperation between governments, universities, business, and people have also created job opportunities and improved the human capacity in Ghana. The constant rise in enrollment suggests that Ghanaians see the value of the CI and what it has to offer. Language and culture go hand in hand; therefore, it may be deduced from the enrolment data that there is a general rise in and appreciation of Chinese language and culture in Ghana.

However, one may ask: what else can the Institute do to further strengthen the implementation of its mandate? The CIUG can provide more scholarships for students to study abroad in China. Environment plays an important role in the acquisition of a language for the learner, that is, most language learners who find themselves among the native speakers of the language can improve upon their language skills, especially their listening and speaking skills. The CIUG can assist more students in acquiring scholarships to China for short-term and long-term courses, which will not only boost and motivate them in learning the Chinese language but also give them the opportunity to practice and communicate frequently with native Chinese speakers.

The CIUG can also give grants for more research work. However good a thing or an initiative is, it could still have flaws that need to be eliminated. The study of the Chinese language in Ghana has developed over the years as more students take interest in the language. However, since the Chinese language is not the native language in Ghana, it comes with challenges that need to be addressed. Researchers have paid attention to development in Chinese studies in Ghana; therefore, if grants are made available for these researchers to undertake research work, most of the challenges faced with teaching and learning Chinese language can be identified and addressed. Indeed, a competitive scholarship or funding scheme can be established and selected scholars sent to China for summer camps to improve their understanding of Chinese culture. Understanding the culture of the language an individual is learning is an integral part of the learning process that can also help the learner to better connect with the native speakers of the language. Hence, the CIUG can help students master the Chinese language by sending them to China for summer camp programs, which will focus on educating students about Chinese culture and how it connects with the Chinese language.

Further still, the CIUG can train more local Chinese language teachers to help in teaching the language across the nation. More schools in Ghana are becoming

interested in adding Chinese language to their curriculum; however, there are not enough teachers available to assist with the teaching of the language. The CIUG can train more students to become Chinese language teachers in the various schools and at the various educational levels of the country. Training local teachers in the Chinese language is more helpful, since they will be able to relate and use both English and local languages to explain some structures or words that might be difficult to explain for the native Chinese teachers themselves.

Finally, sustainability is an important consideration, so the CIUG can organize more of the kind of cultural activities that we witnessed on April 21 2023 for students and learners of the Chinese language to experience and familiarize themselves with the cultural context that goes along with the language. These activities, which should not be only once in a while, will allow students learning in Ghana to experience Chinese culture even in Ghana, as well as embracing the diversity or differences between the Ghanaian and Chinese cultures.

Even though the Confucius Institute at the University of Ghana is collaborating well with Zhejiang University of Technology and the Confucius Institute headquarters in China to promote educational cooperation, the collaboration is far more one-sided, with the Chinese cultural economic and political agenda taking center stage.

First, granted that the CIs were established to promote Chinese language and culture, African partners still need to utilize the CIs' structures to promote African languages and culture in the opposite direction if, indeed, the collaboration is to advance the African cultural profile as well. While some African countries, like Kenya and South Africa, are trying to exploit the Africa–China cultural cooperation to promote their national brands through tourism, more needs to be done in the context of CI and African culture. Rather than emphasizing Chinese language and culture, educational exchanges should explore student exchanges where Chinese students are facilitated to come and learn African culture and languages, too.

Secondly, the power disparity between Chinese actors and African recipients promotes patronage where Chinese actors dictate the agenda, roles, and goals of CIs. This may not be sustainable, as it limits the extent to which genuine interaction happens. There is the danger of withdrawal once the dominant actor achieves their objectives or when the recipient senses ulterior political and economic motives threatening the relationship. The principle of co-directorship at the helm of CI in some African countries is one way to enhance mutual learning and promote a two-way communication and promotion of African ideas, perspectives, and interests in the CI arrangement. According to Buckle (2012), the more distance there is between the agent of cultural diplomacy and the political and economic agenda, the more sustainable the program. Moreover, the more interactive and two-sided the exchange, the more likely the program is to be sustainable.

Third, African learning institutions hosting CIs should promote mutual learning and innovation by imputing African expertise, theories, concepts, and perspectives at the heart of CIs hosted in their institutions. African culture and Chinese culture differ from one other in many aspects, and institutions of higher learning should be at the forefront in promoting the normative and ideation resources that advance African political values, philosophy, and moral appeals.

6 Conclusion

As Bodomo (2009) and subsequent work continues to point out, there is much asymmetry in Africa–China relations. We have shown in this chapter a short description of the presence of CIs in Africa and their impact, with a case study as empirical evidence that one of the two partners, China, is doing all it can to promote its language and culture in Africa, while the other partner, Africa, is apparently silent. As mentioned by Adeli and Ammann (in this volume), with regard to the "roles of narratives" in the cultural aspects of the BRI, the narrative surrounding the CIs are of an asymmetrical nature. Apart from efforts by individuals to teach African languages and cultures in China, including the first author of this paper, who started an African Studies program (that taught Swahili, Hausa, Akan, and Dagaare) at the University of Hong Kong in 2008, we are not aware of any African government program to teach Africa languages and cultures in China. This must change, and we propose the establishment of African cultural institutes in China (Bodomo 2022), which we may choose to name after our political heroes and intellectuals, giving us names such as Mandela Institute, Nkrumah Institute, and Nyerere Institute.

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Chapter 8

In Between Dreams – Re:Actions from the African continent

A conversation with Adams Bodomo

Adams Bodomo, Linda Ammann,
Daniel Kossmann, and John Njenga Karugia
Edited by Linda Ammann

Introduction

This interview was recorded as part of the De:link//Re:link Podcast, a podcast that explores local insights and new knowledges.
For the podcast episode, we invited Ghanian academic and professor for African linguistics and literature, Adams Bodomo. We talked about language and identity, Africa–China–Europe relations, narratives about the Belt and Road Initiative, and cultural diplomacy. The following are excerpts from the transcribed podcast interview edited by Linda Ammann.

Linda Ammann Welcome, Adams Bodomo.
We are very happy that you could join us for this podcast episode today. You are a professor for African linguistics and literature at the University of Vienna, and you have done pioneering research in many disciplines—amongst others, in African linguistics, diaspora studies, and Africa–China–Europe relations. You were born in Ghana and studied at the University of Ghana before moving to Norway, where you earned your PhD degree from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim.

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Podcast "In Between Dreams – Re:Actions from the African continent: A conversation with Adams Bodomo" by Adams Bodomo, Linda Ammann, Daniel Kossmann, and John Njenga Karugia

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You lived and taught all around the globe, including the US, China, Germany, and Austria. You have written 20 books and more than 100 journal articles, are on the editorial board of many journals, won awards, speak a lot of languages, are a poet and mentor, and on top of everything, you are also good at sports. I am sure there is something important that I forgot to mention right now, so please, Adams, feel free to add.

Adams Bodomo No, there is nothing to add. Linda, John, and Daniel, I am very happy to be here with you in this studio. I am really very glad, very honored to be here and talking and sharing ideas with you. Thank you very much!

Linda Ammann The BRI is not only a gigantic trans-regional infrastructure project but also comes with an ideological, political concept—the Chinese Dream—and lots of different narratives. Let's take your home country, Ghana, as an example. Do you have the impression that the citizens of Ghana are being introduced to parts of the Chinese Dream through the BRI projects? And what kinds of BRI narratives are communicated by the government of Ghana?

Adams Bodomo Okay, thank you very much. This is a complex question that needs to be looked at in different ways.

First of all, you mentioned that the BRI has been linked to the Chinese Dream. That's a very good beginning. It's a very good way to start to look at it.

When Xi Jinping arrived on the scene in 2013, this idea of the Chinese Dream was introduced, and then the BRI. To me, it seems like the Chinese Dream is like the software of this whole thing, the ideological underpinnings.

The BRI is then the infrastructure that implements this kind of software—I mean, this kind of ideological underpinning—both in China, but also outside China and onto the world.

Now, coming back to the idea of the BRI in Ghana: in Ghana, of course, not many Ghanaians know what the BRI is, but they are getting the effect of it in various ways. The government, of course, knows what the BRI is, as far as building, mining, and the like is concerned. So yes, the government is getting Ghanaians to understand that China is coming in and China is doing this and that, and the people understand that, yes, China is doing something in Ghana.

But the people of Ghana are also understanding that the relationship is not all that rosy, that there are several things. For example, if you look at what in Ghana is called *galamsey,*[1] that is, surface mining. Surface mining is a very big problem for the average Ghanaian. Ghanaians know that some Chinese firms are involved

1 *Galamsey* is derived from the English phrase "gather them and sell" and refers to small-scale and often illegal surface mining in Ghana (cf. e.g. https://news.mongabay.com/2023/02/

in this surface mining and that surface mining actually pollutes the environment. It pollutes our waterways.

In sum, the BRI project effects in Ghana are both positive and negative. If you ask the average Ghanaian, positive in the sense that we know of infrastructure being built; negative in the sense that we know of some wayward Chinese companies spoiling the environment, which affects especially rural Ghanaians. Don't forget that in much of rural Ghana, we don't have running tap water. We depend on the streams that flow through our villages, and so if you pollute, if you put something into the water upstream, definitely downstream people are going to drink it. That's not good for them and they know this.

Thus, the BRI in Ghana is a double-edged sword, so to speak. That's how I summarize it. It's a double-edged sword from the perspective of the average Ghanaian.

Linda Ammann But do you have the impression that in the communication of the government to the citizens about these projects, there is a little bit of this Chinese Dream narrative coming through? Or is this not at all communicated in Ghana?
Adams Bodomo Not really. Again, the average Ghanaian doesn't know anything about the Chinese Dream. In a way, university students would know, people who study at Confucius Centers, and people who study Chinese; and then intellectuals, of course, know of what the Chinese Dream is. It's an attempt by China to rejuvenate. It's an attempt by China to rehabilitate its institutions. It's an attempt by China to revitalize its state institutions and to take on the world. They know this.

They also know about the American dream and what it is about. They know people are dreaming. I've actually critiqued this idea that when two big powers are dreaming, we need to be careful about those dreams. We, in Africa, have to be careful. So yes, the average intellectual, Ghanaian intellectual, knows about the Chinese Dream. The masses are not aware of this. They just know that there's a Chinese craze, if I may say. There's a Chinese craze in terms of trade, in terms of investment, in terms of building infrastructure projects. There is no consciousness about the *Chinese Dream*, but there's consciousness about the *Chinese craze* in terms of engagement in Ghana.

John Njenga Karugia China is financing various Belt and Road Initiative projects through long-term loans. There have been allegations that these loans are unsustainable, as well as suspicions of debt trap diplomacy. What is your take on this?

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mechanization-of-illegal-gold-mining-threatens-ghanas-forests/, accessed 17 Nov. 2023) (editor's remark).

Adams Bodomo Well, thank you, John. The debt trap debate is something that has just come in the way of so many things happening. Sometimes, when two people are engaged in something, having policies, debating policies, and trying to come up with some idea of helping each other and win–win relations, and then somebody drops in something, and it has ripple effects. We've had how many FOCAC group meetings now? More than five or six now. While all this was happening, two or three years ago, somebody just got up and invented the idea that there was this debt trap, that the amount of loans China is giving to Africa—and also, by the way, other Asian countries like Sri Lanka—is creating a situation of debt trap, what does it mean? That because I give you so much, I lend so much to you, if you cannot pay, then I'm able to control the structures of your institutions, I mean, or your institutional structures. You depend on me. If I tell you to do something, you will do it and therefore control you. So that's the idea of debt trap.

Well, this is what I have to say. I'm not going to deny that a lot of African countries owe China, but let us go back into the past. Actually, I want to contend that African countries owe the Bretton Woods institutions more money than they owe China. Why? Because the Bretton Woods institutions have been there for long. The Bretton Woods includes the IMF, the World Bank, and many other things. So, the African countries, African governments, owe these institutions a lot of money. In addition to that, there's what France has been doing in Africa.

After France colonized the African countries, when it was going back, it said that it's going to get the African countries to pay for all that they did in African countries. So, there's this idea of the colonial debt as well. African countries are paying France about $500 billion a year, according to one former African Union ambassador, Dr. Chihombori. African countries pay France every year $500 billion US dollars as colonial debt. I'm putting this in perspective.

Now, come back to the idea of China's debt diplomacy or *China's debt trap*. When you begin to focus on these kinds of things, what is the strategy here? The strategy here is to say that, well, forget about what you already owe us. The question now becomes China being a bad participant, a bad actor in the African world, when, indeed, Africa doesn't owe China as much as the old West and Bretton Woods institutions. This is the perspective under which I want us to understand the whole so-called debt trap. The debt trap is not something that should stand in the way of Africa–China relations. My take on that is that we as Africans should understand that owing somebody compromises our independence, and we should be careful what we use this money for. Everybody owes somebody. I guess there was a recent post showing how even the G7 countries, each of them, owes somebody. Owing somebody is not a bad thing, per se, in the economic situation. I wouldn't put the debt trap as some kind of albatross on the neck of Africa that

we should avoid. We should owe China, but we should be careful of what we use that money for. We should invest well so that, in the future, we can pay back China and also pay back the Bretton Woods institutions so that we can be independent.

I think that's how I look at it. The debt trap is there, but it shouldn't be something we should discuss and just put aside all the good things that we can do together with China. The debt trap is just something thrown in by somebody somewhere to confuse or to confound or to create problems between Africa and China.

Daniel Kossmann Professor Bodomo, we were already talking about one part of China's diplomacy, the debt trap diplomacy. Let's talk about a different aspect. I would like to talk about education aid and China's cultural diplomacy. Both are very important in China's strategy. According to data from China's Ministry of Education presented in a Global Times article on China's, October 18th, 2021, there were more than 80,000 African students in China in 2018.[2] This makes China the second most popular study destination for African students, with France being still the number one. How come China is that popular amongst African students? What motivates these students to study in China? And is it already clear which effects the COVID-19 pandemic has had in this regard?

Adams Bodomo Thank you very much, Daniel, for this wonderful question about the exchanges between Africa and China on the question of education. It's not just something that happened recently. It's always been there. In fact, don't forget that China was part of this whole "Eastern sphere." So, as many students went to the Soviet Union, some of them also went to China. This whole idea of exchange, of having students go to China, is not a new thing.

But since the year 2000, when the Forum for African China Corporation was established, particular attention was paid to training young Africans. That's when this whole thing got renewed and got revamped and so many students are in China now.

To answer your question, why is it like this? A number of issues. One, they are getting direct government-to-government scholarships. You just have to go to your embassy or some kind of institution in your country and then apply, and if the position is there, you get it. It's quite transparent, I must say, even though it differs from country to country. Secondly, Africans are also going there because of some of the things that they can't get in the West. I've interviewed some African students who went there to study Chinese medicine, for example. And by the way, it's not only government-sponsored Africans who go to China to study but also private people who go to China to study. I have interviewed a lot of these

2 https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202110/1236570.shtml (accessed 21 Nov. 2023).

students who go to study things like Chinese medicine, Chinese language, et cetera. Third reason why they go there is that they can mingle education with trade. Many of the people I have interviewed in China, actually, were people who came to study but who started a business in trading. And so, therefore, it became lucrative. They build up a business and they could get other opportunities that they couldn't get in the West.

These are three reasons, but a fourth reason can also be that it's the novelty of it. Young people are very curious. We already know a lot about the West. There's been these years and years of exchange between Africa and the US, Africa and Europe. But young people also want to look at other cultures. And I think that's a fourth reason why this whole program of exchange, of sending students from Africa to China, is popular.

By the way, it's not only students. It's also government workers who go there to train, for short-term periods of training. Middle-level government workers, civil servants, have also gone to China to train. These are some of the reasons, to answer your question, why it is quite popular.

Daniel Kossmann As we have heard, educational cooperation with Africa does hold a key role in Sino-African relations. Another aspect of China's educational aid and cultural diplomacy is the establishment of Confucius Institutes. The first one on the African continent opened in 2005. By now there are already 61 Confucius Institutes in Africa. That's an amazing growth rate, I think. These institutes, however, have not been criticized by Africans as much as they have been criticized in the US or Europe. Does the narrative of mutuality and friendship really work in the African context? And on another note, is there less asymmetry in cultural diplomacy between China and Africa than there is between countries of the Global North and Africa?

Adams Bodomo Okay. Thank you very much, Daniel, for your question. The Confucius Institutes have come to stay. The Confucius Institutes are there. Some of us welcome the Confucius Institutes, because they are part of China's cultural exportation to the world. You cannot want to have Chinese investment at the level of economics, and not want to have Chinese culture. It depends on what we do with it, right?

The Confucius Institutes have a role to play. They help us understand who we are trading with. They help us understand who we are dealing with. They teach us their language and they teach us their culture through these institutes. They invest in them. This is not different from what happens with our Western partners. So even though there are differences, the Confucius Institute is not entirely different from the British Council. The Confucius Institute is not entirely different from the Alliance Française. The Confucius Institute is not entirely different from the

Goethe Institute. They all have the goal of teaching Africans their languages and cultures in various countries. So, in that sense, they are not different. They may be structured differently, but they have the same goal. So again, the Confucius Institute is not an exception, not an exceptional thing.

What do Africans say about it? Of course, there are noises about why they are teaching Chinese. However, anybody who doesn't criticize the presence of the Goethe Institute in Africa, or the Alliance Française in Africa, or the British Council in Africa, but criticizes the Confucius Institute, is being hypocritical. We need to look at it in this context.

Now, you talk about asymmetry, and I think it's a very important point you make, and I have also been making that point. So that's the other side of the equation, that the Chinese come and teach us their culture and their language on our continent. What are we doing? If it is supposed to be a win–win or symmetrical relationship, which it is not at this point, why aren't Africans or African governments teaching the Chinese African languages in China, or on the Asian continent? Why isn't somebody teaching them African culture in China?

Of course, I know private institutions and private individuals in China teaching Chinese African culture, like dance, and music, and the like. That has happened, but at the government level, we're not seeing that.

So, there is a clear asymmetry. It is clearly asymmetrical, and you are right, and we need to do something about it. The asymmetries cut across all aspects of the relationship—political, economic, cultural, and linguistic as well, of course. We need to recognize this rather than criticizing the presence of the Confucius Institutes. We need to say, okay, maybe the African Union can even symbolically start some African cultural institution in China, but also, of course, in the West. We need to address the asymmetry. I don't know if there's some other part of your question I forgot to address.

Daniel Kossmann It actually has to do with your answer. I was also asking about the narrative of mutuality and friendship in the African context, if it worked. But I think your answer provides that even though there is the narrative of mutuality and friendship in practice, there's still some asymmetry. So, the practical aspect of mutuality, especially on the African side, is still missing.

Adams Bodomo Yes, let me talk about the discourse of mutuality. The discourse is pervasive. You can get this narration, you can get these discourses in the policy texts. They are there in the FOCAC agreement texts. Every three years, these guys meet and the narration is there. The discourse is plenty. It is just discourse, but the action is lacking. In terms of government-to-government relations, the narration, the discourse is plenty. The discourse is pervasive. In terms of people-to-people narration, it's there partially. But again, coming back to the average African, to

the average Ghanaian, to the average Kenyan, to the average South African, to the average Ugandan, to the average Senegalese: this discourse of mutuality is not there, they just worry about Chinese presence. That's where you see the discourse coming that, "oh wow, these guys are coming in, they're taking things." So that narration, at that level, you will see it. But the more refined narration of mutuality, you can find at the government-to-government level. That's what I have to say.

Daniel Kossmann This discourse of mutuality, if I may comment on that, I think is also lacking then on the European side, isn't it? Because European partners are also many times telling the African audience that their work is actually happening on an eye level, but in reality, it's nevertheless criticized as much as the Chinese approach is criticized.

Adams Bodomo Yes, we forgot to address the European aspect of your question. Yes, the discourse of mutuality. Again, there's a stark difference between the Africa–China discourse and the Africa–Europe discourse, because of the long history of contact with our traditional partners, the Europeans. The Africa–China discourse, again, at the government-to-government level, is more of talking about mutuality, talking about people in the same shoe; we've all gone through colonialism, and so therefore, we are brothers and sisters, we should help each other. That discourse is there.

The discourse between Africa and Europe, I must say, because of the colonial legacy, it's a paternalistic discourse. It has to change.

And it's also a discourse that says that, well, we, the Europeans, did this in Africa. We did this bad, and it's our duty to go back there and solve the problem. So therefore, it is paternalistic in that sense. Well, we need to take care of Africa. We need to right the wrongs we did, so therefore, the Europeans have always gone there for the purpose of aid, not so much for the purpose of trade. And so that discourse, because of the colonial legacy, is a discourse that is not a discourse like the Chinese discourse. It's a discourse that is as if there is a relation not between equals. It's between people who perpetrated something and people who are victims, and so therefore, something needs to be done about it. And I think that my advice, I've said this many times, that if Europe wants to get back into the game… By the way, let me say something. I always say this at the end of my interviews. Africa is a very vast continent. There's room for everybody, whether China or Korea or Japan or Germany or America. There's room for everybody. You just have to be a good player. It's always said that in my father's or in my mother's house, there's room for everybody. So, Africa welcomes anybody who wants to get involved with the level of politics or economics or culture. But this discourse of paternalism must change. And if it doesn't change, it's going to make the African think that, "okay, China listens to us more than Europe listens

to us." And I think that there's a lot of asymmetry on that part. I don't know if I've answered your question well, but this is how I see it. I'm a little bit critical on this. It has to change. And how do we change it? By European countries, the EU, for example, seeing the African Union as a partner. In fact, the EU used to neglect the African Union. The EU used to say that they would not engage the African Union, that they will engage individual African countries. It is some of us who have criticized this approach, and we just made it possible for the EU and the African Union to meet at that level. So that discourse, that feeling, that approach of aid and not trade, must change.

Linda Ammann Adams, you are also an expert on Africa–China–Europe relations, and you have been traveling the African continent quite a lot, from what I understand. I am deeply curious to hear from your experience: how is the BRI perceived on the African continent, and how have the perspectives on the BRI changed in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Adams Bodomo Okay. The BRI, again, is an intellectualist conceptualization. The BRI belongs to the elites. The idea of a BRI, if you walk into the streets of Kumasi, which is our second largest city, and you say: "Do you know anything about the BRI?" Nobody is going to say anything. People are going to say: "What are you talking about?" So, the BRI is known in intellectualist circles. It is known at the universities. It is known within the government circles. It is known among journalists, but it is not known among the vast majority of masses in the markets of Accra, in the markets of Kumasi, in the markets of Johannesburg, in the markets of Nairobi. It is not known, but they feel the effect.

So, for now, I will stay then at that level of intellectualism. Yes, the BRI is known. By the way, it doesn't mean that all the institutions or all the projects we call BRI came after 2013, when the BRI was officially started. Many of China's projects and investments were there before the BRI came. But when the BRI came, they were collectively part of the BRI. It's a collective term for Chinese investment, so, for example, even one of the most well-known BRI-projects in Africa, the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) in Kenya, was also just put under the name BRI. So, just in terms of that, the Africans, even including the people I mentioned in the market, they know that there are BRI projects going on. They know that it is affecting them. They know that China is constructing roads. China is constructing railways. China is constructing stadia. But the people do not know the term BRI. They just know that China is working. So, if we discuss at that level, then we can say that yes, the discourse is there. They know of it and they evaluate it. Not just only knowing of it: the people of Africa, including governments, evaluate it on a daily basis, evaluate its pros and cons. They talk about the positives of this investment, of this engagement, but they are also very careful, they are also very

critical about what they consider to be the negatives of this engagement, including the pollution that I mentioned earlier. In Ghana, we call it *galamsey*. Once people hear about the term *galamsey,* which is illegal surface mining, people talk about the Chinese. That is, on a semantic camp, linguistically speaking, *galamsey* always triggers China. Thank you.

Daniel Kossmann Professor Bodomo, in 2009, already some years ago, in your article "Africa–China relations: Strengthening symmetry with soft power",[3] you suggested that, and I quote, "prominent economies on the African continent such as South Africa, Egypt, and Nigeria have an important role to play in ensuring a symmetrical relationship in which Africa can also take part in a symmetrical cultural diplomacy with China, such as in the setting up of pan-African cultural institutes in China." What has changed since then?

Adams Bodomo Nothing, I must say. In terms of establishing the diplomatic institutions, cultural institutions—nothing. Well, I won't say nothing. Since 2018, the African Union has a center in China. There is an African Union center in China which brings together all the African ambassadors, and they have a place. They can come there. I had a wonderful situation of addressing all 55 ambassadors from the various African countries in that center. So yes, at a political level, something has happened, but at a cultural institutional level, nothing has happened. There's no African cultural institute there, and I think that this must happen. Now, the background to me writing that article was a certain kind of euphoria that took place when the BRIC economic group, Brazil, Russia, India, and China, admitted South Africa into the group and then called it the BRICS. South Africa was the only African country there, and it's meant to be representing all of Africa. So there was a certain kind of euphoria at the time I wrote the article that, yes, the major economies of the various regions in Africa, South Africa representing Southern Africa, Kenya representing Eastern Africa, Nigeria representing West Africa, and Egypt representing North Africa, should take leadership roles in promoting African affairs, in trying to create a certain kind of symmetry between us and the partners that we engage with, whether China or Europe or America. So, that was the context in which I wrote that article. But in terms of assessment of what has happened within the approximately ten years since I wrote the article: not much besides the establishment of the AU Centre in Beijing.

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3 https://www.pambazuka.org/global-south/africa-china-relations-strengthening-symmetry-soft-power (accessed 7 Mar. 2022). If not accessible, cf. almost identical article Bodomo (2009): "Africa–China Relations: Symmetry, Soft Power and South Africa," *China Review,* vol. 9, no. 2, *Special Issue: Religious Studies in China,* pp. 169–178.

Daniel Kossmann So, there is still no joint African cultural diplomacy?
Adams Bodomo You mean joint African cultural diplomacy, when we deal with other partners…

Daniel Kossmann … for example, through the African Union?
Adams Bodomo No, not that I'm aware of. Of course, the African Union has a section on social engagement (they don't even mention the word culture) they call ECOSOCC.[4] The ECOSOCC promotes African culture, but they haven't established any institution. Do you hear about ECOSOCC promoting an African institution in Germany here? No. Do you hear about ECOSOCC promoting an African institution in America? No. They also haven't done anything the like in China. The African Union needs to understand that it is not only at the level of politics, international relations, and economy that they need to be active. They need to understand that. We need to be active. We need to promote African culture. No emerging country goes into the world promoting other people's cultures. Africans have to take their culture along with them as they emerge into the world. There's no reason why South Africa or other African countries shouldn't promote their languages in China.

I recently examined a PhD thesis from Bayreuth University, which is titled *Language and Interaction in the Chinese Community in Cameroon – A Sociolinguistic Profile.*[5] It was a wonderful thesis, a great thesis. But I was struck by something that the ordinary Cameroonians interviewed were asking the candidate: "Why is it that the Chinese come here and they don't learn our language?" and by "their language" they meant French. "And why do they like our money but they don't like our language?" talking about French, and I was struck by that. Why would you demand the Chinese to learn French in Cameroon? Why shouldn't you tell them to learn at least one Cameroonian language? You know, so that is what I mean by Africa mustn't neglect its cultural institutions, linguistic and cultural institutions, as it emerges into the world. It must take along these institutions. Thank you.

John Njenga Karugia I don't know whether you would agree, yet there have been some people who have suggested that English as a language has been decentered. It does not belong to the British anymore, and it has gone into the world and many things have happened to it. Thus, there are all these Englishes, and maybe there

4 ECOSOCC is the Economic, Social & Cultural Council of the African Union, cf. https://ecosocc.au.int/ (accessed 17 Nov. 2023) (editor's remark).

5 Kenne Kenne, Jocelyne. *Language and Interaction in the Chinese Community in Cameroon – A Sociolinguistic Profile.* 2023. PhD dissertation. Beiträge zur Afrika-Forschung. Berlin, Lit Verlag Dr. W. Hopf.

is also French which has been decentered, and there are many Frenches. I mean, maybe this person has felt very close to French in that sense. I do not know what your response would be.

Adams Bodomo Well, well, John, isn't it interesting that it is only former colonial languages that have been decentered? Has anybody ever thought of decentering Swahili? Has anybody ever thought of decentering Hausa? There lies the problem. Nobody is against learning other languages. We are all world citizens, but everybody should worry about learning his or her language. I don't believe in the idea that English is an African language. I disagree completely. French is not an African language. English is not an African language. The Europeans will never say that Swahili is a European language. Until the Europeans agree that Swahili is a European language, I will never agree that English is an African language. Until the Chinese agree that Swahili or Hausa are Chinese languages, I will never agree that Chinese is an African language. Do you see my point? This is where I am coming from. I think that, like your own countryman, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, it is part of colonizing the mind. It is only when our minds are colonized that we begin to think like this, to say that English is now an African language, that French is now an African language.

Linda Ammann Adams, you have been working and publishing on different issues of identity. Can you tell us what insights you gained on the connection between language and identity in general? And does language as an identity-forming factor increase when people are living abroad?

Adams Bodomo Thank you very much, Linda. You are a linguist and I'm a linguist. We know how important language is when it comes to unpacking the individual. Language is not only a means of communicating, it is not only just a code whereby we try to get meaning out of things. Language is, indeed, as important as other physical features such as our skin color, our hair, everything. Language is that important.

If you disagree with me, just go to a place and open your mouth to speak. Whatever language you speak, through that, people will have an idea of where you come from. Thus, language is that important.

And identity, what is identity? It is just a package of different variables that define us. And I have an idea that I call identity packaging. People package who they are differently from place to place.

How I introduce myself in my hometown is different from how I introduce myself in the capital of Ghana, in Accra, or from how I introduce myself as I come here to your wonderful city of Berlin as a research fellow.

The way you introduce yourself is about identity packaging, and language goes along with it. So that leads into your question about what is the role of identity

when you are in your country and when you are a migrant or when you are an immigrant. That identity becomes very important. It meets other languages. Your language comes along with you. In your hometown, it's probably the only language or main language, but as you travel and as you live abroad, your language now is in the vicinity, is in the same space as other languages. How you deal with this depends on what you want. In some cases, even just because you are in a foreign land and because it is part of your identity, you want to project it as much as possible to show who you are. In other cases, because you are in a foreign country, you want to live outside your language so that you can learn the language of your host and progress in life. Different situations make you handle your language in different ways. But whatever the case, your language and other languages you speak are always going to be an important part of who you are, of your identity. Thank you.

Linda Ammann Okay, I think this was our last question. Thank you very much for joining us today, Adams Bodomo, it was a pleasure talking to you. I think we gained a lot of insights from speaking to you.
Adams Bodomo Thank you for having me.

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It is not only goods, financial capital or technologies that are being traded, negotiated and circulated along the China-led Belt and Road Initiative but also values, emotions and cultural practices. The latter are often decisive when imagining and establishing a transregional infrastructure of the scale of the BRI. This book explores connections and disconnections along the New Silk Roads through narratives and their cultural configurations. Focusing on China-Africa-relations, the authors of this book investigate the role of narratives and various forms of cultural configurations to understand how processes of transregionalization shape local patterns of thought, perception and practice.

"With its focus on the agency of cultural practices and heritage in forms of poetry, novellas, art and exhibition making or language education at the one hand, and an emphasis on the importance of narratives in the emotional and aesthetic architecture of the Silk Road on the other, the book breaks new ground in an original and courageous way, as well as it calls for an urgently needed shift in perspective on BRI research (...)."
Manja Stephan-Emmrich (Humboldt-Universität, Berlin)

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