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

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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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