

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

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## 1 Introduction

A lot has been talked and written about the China Dream<sup>1</sup> 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

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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.



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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<sup>2</sup> 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

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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).<sup>3</sup>

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

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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).<sup>4</sup>

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).<sup>5</sup> 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

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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.<sup>6</sup> 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 Casualty 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).

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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.<sup>7</sup> 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<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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)

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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 splendour 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 about 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*<sup>10</sup> and the way they show *heshima*.<sup>11</sup> 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

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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.<sup>12</sup> 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)

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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 cacophonous 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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