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# Triangulating Africa: Contemporary art as a terrain for creating China–Africa connections

## ABSTRACT

*Colonization and race are important issues influencing international contemporary art practice, but related discourse is often focused with Europe or America at one end of a binary dialogue opposing the peripheries and former colonies. Since mid-twentieth century, following the independence of new nation states and events such as the 1955 Bandung Conference, there has been an increasing awareness to create new axes of sociopolitical connections. China–Africa relations evolve from this context but remains a topic mostly studied from state-level politics and economics. Recently, artists from the Greater Chinese context have started investigating ways of understanding Africa culturally through their artworks. Pu Yingwei (mainland China), Musquiqui Chihying (Taiwan) and Enoch Cheng (HK) are three young artists whose recent works focus on creating more intimate narratives to construct an understanding of China–Africa relations. China is introduced in the dichotomous mode of discourse, and this new triangulated focus expand the understanding of China–Africa relations by offering more nuanced perspectives.*

## KEYWORDS

China–Africa relations  
contemporary Chinese  
art  
triangulation  
diaspora  
postcolonial  
race

## INTRODUCTION

China the country and Africa the continent begin to really know each other from the middle of the twentieth century. China was emerging through a long turn of the century from civil war. Meanwhile, African countries declared independence from European colonial powers one by one. Since the 1955 *Bandung Conference*, the Third World as a concept and affiliated countries as a united force for mutual aid and development as well as the ideal of Afro-Asian solidarity have gained increasing ideological importance against the backdrop of the Cold War and rapid post-Second World War industrialization and globalization.

Moving into the twenty-first century, with China's growing economic importance and particularly as Chinese leader Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China becomes a crucial trade partner and investor in many African countries, competing in various sectors with European countries who were traditionally the most influential decision-makers in Africa. In the case of Chinese presence in Africa, one must also remember the long diplomatic competition between mainland China and Taiwan for legitimacy and diplomatic allies on the continent. China's reputation in Africa is far from one-sided. Views on China's growing influence in Africa range from the sceptical alluding to China's neo-colonialist and capitalist ambitions to a realist view of the Chinese as pragmatic businessmen. There is also rising attention to examine the role and agency of African actors in this relationship, both at the state-level and as ordinary individuals (Otele 2020: 275–76). Nevertheless, most of the time scholarly attention on China–Africa relations falls in the arena of geopolitics and economics. Cultural exchanges are less frequently discussed both officially and academically. Even when they are studied, it is principally through popular media phenomenons and educational exchanges.

Africa as a subject or terrain of study has nevertheless found a way into artistic practices. Recent artworks and exhibitions around the topic of China–Africa connections or relations from three young artists of the Greater China region – Pu Yingwei from mainland China, Musquiqui Chihying from Taiwan and Enoch Cheng from Hong Kong – will be examined in this article. Their research-oriented approach and transnational perspective allow for a more nuanced reading of China–Africa relations at different narrative levels, expanding our imaginaries beyond state-level policy and trade. For the purpose of this article, the notion of the Greater China region is based on the officially recognized mainland Chinese concept of Two Shores and Three Territories (*liang'an sandi*) commonly seen and used in Chinese mass media. It refers to the three territories of mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong/Macau across the two shores of the Taiwan Strait. Even though these regions can vary greatly in certain aspects such as political regime and cultural policies, nevertheless generally the residents, and in particular the artists analysed in this article, are racially East Asian and Chinese-speaking.

Finding a way and a position to unpack postcolonial and racial topics has never been more relevant in contemporary art practices. These artists' works are inscribed within this broader context of creation. Their cross-cultural angle of observation resulting from diaspora experience forms another axis of diagnosis on questions of postcolonial globalization and racialization outside the dominant dichotomous discourse using the West as a ubiquitous anchor and offers new and diversified possibilities of contextualization.

## FRAMING CHINA–AFRICA AND THE WEST THROUGH DIASPORIC EXPERIENCE

In her poignant 1999 essay, Claire Kim states piercingly that Asian Americans are racially triangulated with reference to Blacks and Whites in a historically persistent and hierarchical system of relative valorization and proximity with Whites at the top. In this system, Asian Americans are positioned as the forever foreign model minority (Kim 1999: 106–07). This framework invented a new path to analysing relative racial positions. Since its publication, Kim's theory has found echo in many scholarly studies beyond the geography of America. This article also departs from this method as a way of examining how recent artworks by loosely defined Chinese artists are reflective of a racial triangulation process between China, Africa and Europe. Art becomes a medium through which artists explore different facets and kinds of contemporary relations between China and Africa. It is nonetheless important to ask whether the triad of China, Africa and the West is the only possibility (Castillo 2020: 323) and the relative position and definition of Chineseness in these works.

The three artists discussed in this article have mostly cultivated a triangulated approach to understanding China and Africa relations through their diasporic experience as international students in Europe. They are a new generation of diasporic artists and part of a growing 2010s group of Chinese students to attend art programmes abroad. This 2010s body of art students abroad have a very different diasporic experience. They command confidently a considerable level of financial and educational choice as to what schools they want to attend against a backdrop of China's rise on the global stage (Sun 2010: 127). They are also much more internationally mobile even when some have moved their studios back to Asia after their studies. This mobility is supported by their participation in exhibitions such as lauded international biennials or residency programmes abroad. Previous generations of Chinese diaspora artists, from earlier twentieth-century masters such as Lin Fengmian (1900–91) to post-Tiananmen artists such as Shen Jiawei (b. 1948) (Maravillas 2007: 267–69), are often studied in relation to their combinatory use of Chinese and western techniques or motifs to signal and negotiate Chineseness (Maravillas 2007; Karetzky 2016). For this younger generation, it would seem that even though their own Chinese cultural identity still informs their practices, such as in the case of China–Africa relations, it no longer has to be the main focus, as we will see in the following sections. In fact, their interest and way of approaching Africa as a subject is almost consistently influenced by their diasporic experience.

Issues of race and discrimination are rarely addressed in China–Africa relations on an official level. Materials destined for the general public whether formal or for entertainment often display an exoticizing tourist view borrowed from an Orientalist and colonial gaze and go unquestioned (Castillo 2021; Batchelor 2022). The state-level Chinese discourse concentrates on BRI initiatives and conveniently grafts the pathos of Third World solidarity such as mutual support 'in the liberation struggles' to the mentality of current day China–African collaborations (SCIO 2021: n.pag.). Chinese state cultural policy in Africa follows and enforces the image of the state as the financial investor and helper and focuses mostly on exporting government-lead initiatives such as Confucius Institutes (Papachristou 2021: 154). This combination can easily lead to a lacunar vision of Africa from a Chinese cultural perspective where Africa remains a far, atemporal and foreign historical partner in bygone

struggles that one does not have to engage with personally. Meanwhile, Chinese presence in Africa and Africans presence in China are also profoundly different and asymmetrical. The Chinese in Africa are usually depicted as professionals in a position of offering help and knowledge, but the African community in China is positioned in a much less privileged social position and its members without official immigration status. The largest community that of African traders in Guangzhou are frequently subject of discrimination inherited from social stereotypes exhibiting fear of disease, violence or miscegenation (Huang 2020: n.pag.). These two types of China–Africa relations do not seem to be reconciliatory. Whereas scholars have recently contributed inspiring studies of grassroots queer cinematic connections between Africa and China (Bao 2020) and a Chinese graffiti artist in South Africa (Metzger 2020: 226–35), publications on China–Africa relations in the larger sense in contemporary art seen through more intimate narratives are still sparse, hence the hope that this article can add to this emerging field.

### **PU YINGWEI'S CHINAFRICA**

2015 was a momentous year in Pu Yingwei's career as an artist. The Charlie Hebdo shooting took place in Paris on 7 January 2015. It was succeeded by the black Friday in November when suicide bomber attacks were deployed at various venues in and around Paris, including an international football match at the Stade de France in Saint-Denis and at a concert at the Bataclan theatre, which evolved into a hostage situation. News about these terrorist attacks became omnipresent. At that point, Pu Yingwei had been in France for two years.

He was born in Taiyuan, China, in 1989. From the capital of Shanxi Province in central China, Pu would go on to study at the Sichuan Fine Arts Institute where he graduated with a BFA. In his biography, the artist recounts his upbringing in a middle-class family. He was an average student at school, which was the reason why his parents suggested his applying to art schools with the hope of attending a better ranked university (Pu Yingwei Archive 2021: n.pag.). He continued to pursue his studies in France where he enrolled as a student at the *École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts de Lyon* in 2013.

Pu Yingwei recounts in an interview with the author that he experienced a conscious identity shift for the first time in France. He goes from being a majority Han-ethnic Chinese to becoming a visible minority. This alteration becomes more pronounced in 2015. In that tense social atmosphere, Pu Yingwei begins to notice and inquire more actively about France's colonial past and became particularly interested in its relation with Africa. He becomes increasingly aware of the differences within what he had previously simply considered the French population. There were those who were originally from the former colonies such as francophone West Africa and North African Maghreb countries. This interest would inform his creative practice in the coming years.

Around roughly the same time, Pu's uncle Li Guiping embarked on his first international voyage. He would spend around eight years as a hydraulic engineer in Africa. Li would notably work on the Karimenu II Dam in Kenya that will appear in Pu Yingwei's later works. Li's experience is not uncommon. Increasingly with the BRI and even from the 1960s and on, many major national-level bilateral cooperation projects are conducted by the Chinese in Africa and internationally. The TAZARA Railway is a famous example. Water

dam construction is a prominent category, and these types of projects are located in various countries on the continent such as the Bui dam in Ghana, the Imboulou in the Republic of Congo or the Gibe III in Ethiopia (Han and Webber 2020: n.pag.). Chinese engineers are often found in the workforce assemblages.

During his time in Africa, Li Guiping keeps in touch with his extended family using WeChat. This allows Pu Yingwei to follow his uncle's experience in Kenya with pictures, videos and stories of his daily life. Pu Yingwei starts amassing materials on Africa both through his own collecting of objects found on French flea markets including collectibles such as stamps and postcards, and through his uncle's firsthand experience. He observes and engages with Africa both from France and through Li's eyes.

In his 2020 exhibition *Photoethics: Chinafrica* curated by Mia Yu and presented at the Jimei x Arles International Photo Festival in Xiamen, many of these collected archival objects were exhibited. We see reproduction prints of postcards and photographs the artist had collected. One of them illustrates an African woman's portrait on a postcard issued by the *Afrique occidentale française* (AOF, French West Africa, which included eight colonial territories) authority with a matching stamp. Another features a person who seems to be a Native American man in a refined outfit paired with a headdress of feathers.



Figure 1: Pu Yingwei, Pu Yingwei and His Nomadism Collection (7), 2020. Collectible printing, hand-coloured photos. Several sizes. Courtesy of the artist.

In these images, the exoticized other is pinned down to become a representative specimen. Pu wrote on some of these postcards collected in France and sent them back home to himself in China, making these images travel again long after they were initially produced.

What Pu Yingwei tries to present in the exhibition is not a static scrutiny of ethnographic curiosities seen through a western colonial gaze. They are juxtaposed with more recent stamps and print materials produced by the Chinese celebrating special events such as the Commemoration of the 55th Anniversary of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of Kenya. Pu Yingwei is keenly aware of China's already imposing and expanding presence in Africa. In fact, the exhibition itself employs the term 'Chinafrica' in its name. *Chinafrica* is the name of a monthly magazine, launched in January 1988 and published by the Beijing Review, both in English and French with 'an aim to present a real China to African readers' (*Chinafrica* 2021: n.pag.). The letter 'a' at the end of the word China is combined with the 'a' at the beginning of the word Africa, suggesting a kind of fusion. It is also uncannily similar to the word *Françafrique*, also commonly seen in French news articles (Le Monde and AFP 2020), referring to France's complex historical ties with Africa and its continued influence in francophone African countries. In this semiotic play, Africa remains on one end but experiences a switch in partnership where France is replaced by China.

In the Xiamen show, Pu Yingwei also starts to follow up with three different individuals' experience in Africa, illustrated in the *Chinafrica Albums*, which was reproduced at a monumental scale as an open book at the entrance of the exhibition. The first protagonist is his uncle Li Guiping. Various entries of his diary were reproduced along with photographs he took, providing accounts from the most banal such as delicious pizza and burger he found a supermarket to more profound reflections on the significance of the construction of the Karimenu II Dam. Li admitted that he is delighted that the hydraulic engineering team had accomplished their mission but was unsure of the mission's true significance (p. 2 of *Chinafrica Albums*). A collage of photographer Li Yanan's works comes second. Last but not least, Taobao shop owner Megan describes her travels in Africa.

These characters will reappear in Pu's video work *Dam Theatre: I Want to be Modern* (2021) presented at the 13th Shanghai Biennial. Following a few high-pitched siren sounds, the artist as narrator begins to tell the audience his story in French, 'a story with accents and grammar mistakes' in a mellow and soothing tone. Li Guiping's story unfolds further with his own photographs of his time in Africa and Pu's narration. In interview style with Li Guiping answering, the viewer understands that according to Li the Karimenu II Dam project is not charity but an investment for the Chinese with the hope that when the local team takes over, they can generate a profit from this new infrastructure. Meanwhile, both Chinese and Africans change as they come into contact with each other. The overall tone is hopeful and amicable.

Li Yanan, identified with Toronto-based NGO Photographers without Borders, continues with his perspective on the Chinese presence in Africa. In his opinion, the Chinese are not interested in colonizing Africa, but only seek to do business and will readily pack up and leave when they think a place yields no more revenue. Megan, the owner of Taobao shop PentFair appears next. She shares about her experience travelling across the African continent, stating its vastness and diversity. PentFair specializes in exotic homeware

and decorative pieces. However, she states that she does not want to offer products only to satisfy people's 'anthropological curiosity' but with genuine understanding and appreciation of the item and its provenance.

Other recuperated bouts of footage are interspersed with this main narrative to include other points of view. Kenyan TV anchors presented the Karimenu II Dam project as a stand-off with the local population demanding to be compensated for an involuntary relocation, but it seems unlikely that



Figures 2 and 3: Views of the exhibition Photoethics: Chinafrica, Xiamen, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

they will receive any indemnity. From the perspective of the news channel, the residents are likely to be simply evicted. The Kenyan perspective offers a less glorious side of a grand infrastructure development project.

A rerun of a number from the 2021 CCTV Spring Festival Gala, 'The African Songs and Dances' lead by singer Zhu Mingying, is also integrated. Zhu, along with a group of singers following her lead, painted her face a dark brown and wore large shiny jewellery and what can be understood as an African-type dress and headband. Older recordings of Zhu's much earlier performances followed, giving indication of her experience learning African songs in the context of learning songs and dances from Third World countries in the 1960s, which was accepted and very different from western blackface performances (Schmitz 2021: n.pag.). Another type of curious reoccurring video clips found in Pu's artwork is ones of short well-wishing video messages commissioned in Africa for paying Chinese recipients. Most of the time, the videos feature a group of children, sometimes dressed up with gaudy Chinese accessories or young men, in military costumes with guns or bare chest showing observable musculature, dancing, holding up Chinese signs and cheering happy birthday to someone (one was for Pu Yingwei). The viewer also gets a glimpse of some behind the scene moments seeing a Chinese cameraman teaching African children to count and sing in Chinese. These videos are usually customized for a few dozens to a couple of hundred yuan and traded via WeChat or Taobao. The addition of these passages adds another layer of complexity to the work. The Spring Festival Gala 'blackface' and the personalized messages pertain more to the realm of mass and popular media for the Chinese, undoubtedly more readily accessible than an exhibition of contemporary art. Their juxtaposition becomes a comment on the portrayal of Blackness in Chinese popular media in an evolving media landscape where a tone of friendly mockery and detachment from international debate still seem to be tolerated.

Painting is another medium Pu Yingwei frequently employs. He presented a monumental frieze at the Shanghai Biennial. Many of the key visual components from the video reappear on this work under a title inscribed on the canvas in a font Pu Yingwei designed combining English and Cyrillic typographies. It reads: 'I WANT TO BE MODERN'. In 2021, the artist was in residency at Mammoth in London. Works Pu Yingwei created during his time there were presented in an exhibition titled *A Study in Scarlet: The Re-origin of Revolutionary Realism*. These large painted collage canvases of scarlet hues Pu unveiled at the show are a commentary on globalization and capitalism – of the past, present and future – steeped in symbolism. Aside from anticipated



Figure 4: Pu Yingwei, *I Want to Be Modern*, 2021. Oil on canvas, paper collage, stamps, silkscreen, gold and silver leaf, markers, paint pens, spray paint, mineral paint, pastels, oil pastels. 200 cm × 200 cm × 5. Courtesy of the artist.



elements such as stamps or covers of *ChinAfrica*, Pu demonstrates a much broader theoretical and speculative horizon here engaging with history and geopolitics from a global perspective. For instance, there is the evocation of evolving capitalism with China Capital written in Coca Cola logo style (see *A Study in Scarlet: New Geography [Two Types of Red Colonies]*, 2021); concerns about labour conditions with a hint to history (*A Study in Scarlet: When the World Becomes a Plantation*, 2021) and speculation on authoritarianism (*A Study in Scarlet: Dominators of the Red Planet*, 2021). We can undoubtedly observe that the artist's works operate not only in reference to recent China–Africa relations but have in mind a more expanded field in which to discuss them. Pu Yingwei's work on *ChinAfrica* spans over different kinds of medium and grew in an accelerated manner over the last three years.

### MUSQUIQUI CHIHING'S MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART

In his 2018–20 experimental documentary *The Sculpture*, Musquiqui Chihying focuses on African art objects. The opening tone is set with French president Emmanuel Macron's 2017 speech at the University of Ouagadougou with the promise of restituting African artefacts from French national collections accumulated throughout the colonial period. The story of the Musée International d'Art d'Afrique (MIAA) collection is introduced quickly. The building that houses the MIAA in Lomé, Togo was bought by Director Xie from Swiss African art dealer and connoisseur René David when the latter let go of it due to ill health (Galerie Walu 2015: n.pag.). The former French ambassador's residence continues to serve as a private museum of African art objects under its new Chinese owner. Director Xie originally hails from Shanghai and worked as a music teacher prior to becoming a businessman in Africa. He is interested in African art objects and have been collecting for some years before acquiring the MIAA. Xie also donated thousands of objects to the National Museum of China in Beijing and the donation became the basis of the institution's permanent display of African art, featured in the film.

The artist balances between European and Chinese narratives of their contact history with Africa. On one hand, a great deal of African objects that found their way into European national collections are spolia from the scramble of Africa. They became the subject matter displayed in ethnographic museums, forever portrayed as the Other in contexts different from western art objects and having to show authenticity in order to be deemed worthy. So called primitive art objects were instrumental in the development of western modern art movements. Now, the discussion is directed on the restitution of these indecorously acquired goods. On the other hand, China's historical contact with Africa seems more sporadic and fragmentary. After the independence struggles in Africa and in Asia and especially after the 1955 *Bandung Conference* where the principle of Third World solidarity earns importance, diplomatic exchanges between China and African countries start to grow and continue to develop. Nevertheless, in the case of Director Xie's donation to China, some African artefacts find another pathway to travel to a new collection and location where they remain foreigners in a foreign land.

This film, commissioned by the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, was included in the official selection of the 2020 International Film Festival Rotterdam where the final version was premiered. It gathered considerable attention along the way leading to its exhibition at various venues in mainland China, including an earlier version shown at Musquiqui Chihying's solo



Figure 5: Musquiqui Chihying, *The Sculpture*, 2018–20. Lecture performance video, photograph and video. 1920×1080, two channels, 28 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

exhibition *I'll Be Back* at the Ullens Center in 2018, in the film programme of the 13th Shanghai Biennial and in *Sino-Wharf: From Chinatown to Red Internationalism Exhibition* at OCAT in Shenzhen. Though supported by the Taiwan National Culture and Arts Foundation, the work has not been exhibited and only screened once in Taiwan. It has not been exhibited in Africa either but have been screened in Europe.

Musquiqui Chihying was born in Taipei in 1985. He studied as an undergraduate student in the department of Fine Arts at Taipei National University of the Arts before moving to Germany to study with Hito Steyerl at the Universität der Künste Berlin where he earned a master's degree in 2015. Since then, Musquiqui Chihying spends his time between Taipei and Berlin. Avoiding to be explicitly associated with a certain gender or Asian ethnicity, he adopted the artist name Musquiqui Chihying combining his first name Chihying with Musquiqui, a playful nod to his earlier experience as a singer and guitarist in a rock band.

It was in Berlin that he first begins to investigate about Europe's colonial past. He worked on a three-channel video entitled *Café Togo* in 2018 with Gregor Kasper, a German film director he met during his time studying at Universität der Künste Berlin. *Café Togo* examines the renaming of

streets in Berlin's African Quarter (Afrikanisches Viertel). The narrative unfolds around the issue of recognizing and renaming public spaces whose names bear connotations to past colonial exploitation and violence, inspected under current day perspective and reckoning of colonialism's profound legacy. It is a concern of growing importance in western countries, especially in light of the Black Lives Matter movement gathering immense global momentum in 2020 following the George Floyd murder protests. For instance, the British Museum displaced founder Hans Sloane's bust from view and a number of American monuments associated with slave trading have been removed.

This would lead to the duo's experience working in Togo where the MIAA is located. Musquiqui Chihying recounts in an interview with the author that growing up in Taiwan, Africa was not much talked about. The stigma of diplomatic failure remains. After the Civil War, Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT) government led Republic of China (ROC) and mainland China's communist PRC competed with each other for diplomatic allies amongst the newly independent African nations. The race ended with Taiwan's failure. The island nation was replaced by PRC at the United Nations in 1971. African countries embraced Chinese investment projects, and Taiwan is left with only one diplomatic ally Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) on the continent. Musquiqui Chihying did not realize that Chinese have become a lingua franca to a certain degree in some African cities. In Africa, he had the experience of being able to make an instant connection with the Chinese working or living there due to his looks and being able to speak Chinese Mandarin. This was also how he established a relationship with Director Xie of the MIAA. This observation prompted the artist to pay close attention to Taiwan's ever-present neighbour's growth and influence in Africa.

Whereas *The Sculpture* engages with a broader postcolonial discourse of truth and restitution, his installation work *The Cultural Center* (2018–20) comments more explicitly on China–Africa relations. Inspired by the archaeological discovery of ancient Chinese coins in Kenya, the artist renders five recently built African cultural institutions financed by the Chinese as memorial coin designs. We find the Museum of Black Civilizations in Dakar, Senegal as one of the five. The coins are displayed against a backdrop of archival materials referencing past and current payment methods such as a Ming dynasty (1368–1644) *Yongle tongbao*, the Alipay logo and the sign of cryptocurrency Bitcoin. The artist's reflections about the use of digital payment methods in Africa, Chinese or otherwise and its impact and significance in everyday life would be explored further in the 2020 artwork *The Currency* co-produced with Togolese rapper Elom 20ce and long-time collaborator Gregor Kasper.

The Museum of Black Civilizations in Dakar, inaugurated in December 2018, was mostly financed by China with an input of roughly €30.5 million (Sarr 2019: 170). It is the long awaited realization of Senegal's founding President Léopold Sédar Senghor's dream of a Pan-African museum. In reality, its establishment, positioning, future development and endowment as a major museum are not devoid of debate both relating to domestic politics, especially concerning presidential elections and issues of restitution, and international relations with China where both sceptical and optimistic attitudes coexist. Actual considerations far surpass the idealism of a mission statement. Such were the ambiguity of these cultural centres. Singaporean artist Ming Wong's 2019 video-poem *Sunu Jappo (Hand in Hand)* features the same museum and also emphasizes on questioning the ramification of Chinese soft power in Africa.



Figure 6: Musquiqui Chihying, *The Cultural Center: Museum of Black Civilisations*, 2018–20. Digital print on acrylic glass, light table, magnifying glass, five set zinc alloy coins. 180 cm × 180 cm × 120 cm (installation). Courtesy of the artist.

In his latest works, Musquiqui Chihying tackles a very specific topic to arrive at the question of racism. *The Lighting* and *The Kung Flu* (both 2021) are respectively a video installation and a lecture performance video commissioned by the Han Nefkens Foundation as the winner of their 2019 Video Art Production Award. *The Lighting* explores the question of image-making of

dark skinned persons from the film era to digital photography. Race is studied in light of technological capabilities. In the Kodak era, film is first developed based on the standard of Shirley cards featuring a White woman with blond hair. Darker skinned persons, Asians or Africans, would appear blurry or out of focus on the film negative because their skin colours, deviating too much from the standard consideration range, were not taken into account.

Right now, digital photography depends on algorithms to capture and distinguish faces in photos. The Chinese brand Tecno is the most successful mobile phone provider in Africa due to its technological improvement in being able to better capture African faces and to lighten the skin tone in the photos taken to render faces legible. This ability is emphasized in all of their advertisements. The recognition function is developed by Tecno's subcontractor MediaTek, a Taiwanese company. Musquiqui Chihying interviews an engineer from MediaTek who explains how computers learn and analyse from data. The technology is still far from perfect. Several professionals from francophone West Africa were also interviewed to give their opinions about the difficulties they have encountered using cameras on dark faces and responded on some possible technological solutions to deal with this kind of situation. Facial recognition also alludes to aspects of surveillance and simulation. The artist would also recreate an avatar of Bruce Lee as the narrator in this multilingual video where the viewer could hear Chinese Mandarin, Cantonese, English and French. Behind the seemingly sterile *façade* of technology, discrimination is still at work.

With *The Lighting*, Taiwan emerges back into the picture. MediaTek is a pioneer in the imaging of dark skin tones through its collaboration with



Figure 7: View of the exhibition *There Are Lights That Never Go Out*, Taipei, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.

Tecno who focuses on maintaining and enlarging their market share in mobile phone sales in Africa. Despite the tense relations between the mainland Chinese and Taiwanese governments, commercial collaborations, especially in the high-tech sector, remain robust. This regional network becomes a way Taiwan engages with Africa today. In *Kung Flu*, named after one of former US President Donald Trump's many unfortunate racist remarks, the question of race comes back home to Taiwan. Discrimination against Asians in Europe and North America due to the association of the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic is examined alongside the many anti-Black racist elements, like Darlie (*heiren* or 'Black man') toothpaste or Heigui ('Black ghost') chocolate cakes, still found in East Asian countries such as Taiwan. These aggressive references full of innuendo still populate supermarket shelves without much public scrutiny. Musquiqui Chihying compares the Asian experience in the West to the African experience in Asia in his discussion of racial identity.

### ENOCH CHENG'S SOUTH AFRICAN TALES

Enoch Cheng was born in Hong Kong in 1983 where he spent his very early years. Cheng joined his family in South Africa where he spent his formative years as a teenager and a young adult. In an interview with the author, he recounts that his connection with South Africa begins with his mother's family. In the 1960s, his maternal grandfather had a small business dealing as a 'parallel trader' of goods across the Hong Kong and mainland China border. He was kidnapped and blackmailed during one of these trading trips. This unpleasant experience was traumatizing and prompted him to emigrate in 1964. South Africa was his destination where he would join his wife's family who had a butcher business there. This is the family story that Enoch Cheng was told, though there are parts that remain mysterious to him. In the 1960s, going to the United States to realize the American Dream, would have been a more obvious choice. However, Chinese transoceanic migration from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic has a much older story and South Africa was one of the ports of call (Metzger 2020: 42–43). It has recently regained popularity in BRI sense China–Africa relations, being one of China's most important trading partners.

Cheng's grandfather travelled to Africa in a container ship that sailed for several weeks on the sea and he ended up staying for good. The grandfather also started a butcher shop, now inherited by Enoch Cheng's uncles, and had his family members join him there. Enoch Cheng and his mother did as well in 1995. It coincides with the emigration wave before the 1997 Hong Kong handover and they were the last ones to join the extended family in South Africa. Three generations of the family now live in South Africa. Cheng himself would move back to Hong Kong for secondary school and study English literature and art history at the University of Hong Kong. He then spent a few years working at the Asian Art Archive before obtaining a MA degree in creative writing from Goldsmiths in London. Cheng's own diasporic experience spans Hong Kong, South Africa and England, having spent time living in all of these places. Though familiar with the world of contemporary art, Cheng's debut as an artist is more recent. He works in a variety of medium, such as video, installation, textile and performance and also curates.

In his 2019–20 film installation *The Story in the Air*, Enoch Cheng creates a backdrop against which memory and storytelling intertwine. This short video is designed to be projected in a loop on a screen of Thai silk with African

wax prints, creating an oneiric ambience. As an artist and having a temporal leeway looking back at an important family story, Cheng is inspired to tell his grandfather's story. Twenty years after he left South Africa, Enoch Cheng is still trying to make sense of this narrative. Fiction and creation are blended when Cheng recounts this story about identity, migration and extinction. Unlike the more direct documentary style in Pu Yingwei's and Musquiqui Chihying's works, Enoch does not have the opportunity to interview his main protagonist for answers as his maternal grandfather passed away some years ago. For Cheng, telling a story helps to shape it and construct lost identities, even though some parts are speculative and can be forgotten. Neither is memory a reliable and static element in Cheng's composition ('The Story Gets Fuzzy These Days'). There is no dialogue in this film but short English phrases appear directly onto the images. The presentation of the film being projected in a loop becomes permit more flexibility because the viewer does not have to follow a very concise narrative from the beginning to the end sitting in front of the screen. They can decide the amount of time they wish to spend viewing the content and if they want to come back again.

Despite its fluidity, Cheng sets the scene in the specific contexts of migration and post-apartheid South Africa. Some of the other scenes we see in this short film feature the cell and prison where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned. The voyage of the last quagga also seems to superimpose with the one undertaken by his grandfather to travel to South Africa. They were both enclosed on a ship and have to enduring a fearsome journey to be delivered to a new and unknown place.

Cheng's interest in natural history is prominent in his using the quagga as a parallel to the unseen human characters involved in the storytelling. The quagga is a zebra subspecies endemic to South Africa with only a few stripes on their upper body. They were hunted down by European settlers and specimens were avidly displayed and collected in European museums as an exotic curiosity hailing from the colonies. When the last quagga in captivity died in Amsterdam in 1883, the animal became extinct. Roughly a hundred years later, the interest in quaggas renewed. Ancient bits of quagga DNA were studied and a selective breeding programme of the quagga's close relatives in genetics was initiated in order to try to breed for a quagga-like specimen with few stripes.

The quagga becomes a metaphor for the migrant experience. The destinations differ, the quagga travels to Europe and the Chinese travel to South Africa, but the feeling of being transported as an object of curiosity remains. Enoch Cheng has already worked on the subjects of migration and extinction in an earlier trilogy where the narrative of his grandfather's migration and the quagga's migration and extinction would already be referenced (*Cortazar Aquarium*, *Same Boat* and *Homesick*).

Strictly speaking, the PRC is not properly evoked in Enoch Cheng's *The Story in the Air*, but it remains a tale of the Chinese experience in Africa. Cheng introduces a narrative where there is a boarder temporal and geographical inclusion of what it means to be culturally Chinese and how ordinary men and woman come to know and live in a land far away from home. Cheng's grandfather's experience as an immigrant is not unique. We can trace a similar trajectory in Henion Han's work *A Letter to my Cousin in China* (1999) where Han's father found himself settled in South Africa by coincidence (having worked for the Taiwanese foreign services in South Africa, he was unable to return to Hainan) and built a life for him and his family in South Africa. The

South African connection is an important element in Cheng's creative practice. Not only is it reflected in many of his recent film installation works, but also in performances and his interest in textile. The artists have already experimented adapting Cantonese opera into his performance *Morphing* (presented in 2019 at Hong Kong's Tai Kwun Dance Season), which interprets a journey in a vessel and the idea of the body as a container of memory.



Figure 8 and 9: Enoch Cheng, *The Story in the Air*, 2019–20. Film installation: single channel video, African wax prints on Thai silk. 4.5 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.



Cheng's interest in textile and fashion led him to combine African wax and Thai silk and to explore textile markets globally from Guangzhou to West Africa. This is tied in with an investigation in globalization and supply chains, a system in which both China and Africa play important roles. Enoch Cheng is producing a burgeoning corpus of work bringing together colonial and natural history, memory and migration. Looking forward, perhaps Cheng's identity as a Hong Konger would also come into play more prominently in this exploration.

## TRIANGULATING IDENTITY

All three diasporic artists share a significant approach in common. The narratives in their artworks are led by the stories of protagonists with whom they have a kinship. Pu Ying does so with his uncle Li Guiping, Enoch Cheng with his grandfather and Musquiqui Chihying with Director Xie through a common language. Like their protagonists, they also have an interest in Africa. Besides Cheng, the two other artists do not have a personal diaspora experience in Africa, but all of their own stories intersect with these of their protagonists.

Pu Yingwei, a mainland Chinese artist who had studied in France, takes a pronounced interest in colonial history after the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris and in China–Africa relations through his uncle's work as a hydraulic engineer in Kenya. Pu Yingwei begins with an archival and comparative mode of creation and have now started to work on more integrative pieces that weaves in more extensive topics of globalization and capitalism.

Musquiqui Chihying's introduction to China–Africa was through his creative experience as a Taiwanese art student and artist working in Germany. A project undertaken in Berlin on colonial history would lead him to plan repetitive trips and fieldwork to Togo where he would film *The Sculpture* and scenes for *The Lighting*. In the capital city Lomé, Musquiqui Chihying starts to feel the presence of Chinese business in Africa and becomes acquainted with Director Xie of the MIAA. The artist also investigates technological innovations behind Chinese mobile phone brand Tecno's success in Africa and their collaboration with Taiwanese firm MediaTek. Musquiqui Chihying inspects issues of collecting and displaying art objects and racism through both European colonialist history and Chinese business and investments in Africa.

Enoch Cheng have lived in Hong Kong and post-apartheid South Africa, and studied in England. As he started working as an artist, Cheng starts to uncover different layers of meaning of his grandfather's journey from Hong Kong to South Africa and experience as an immigrant. The artist juxtaposes family history with his research in natural history case studies, particularly of animals such as the quagga whose destiny and extinction are intricately linked to colonial trajectories and practices of collecting.

China, Africa and Europe are the three origins where these multilingual storylines and concepts take inspiration from and they modulate the continued and developing narratives in the artist's works. Both the artists' personal experiences and storytelling focus engage with a triangulated rather than a binary framework to benefit from more diverse references, perspectives and discourses. This process of triangulating occurs on two different levels, to the artists as well as the protagonists, ideologically and in the stories.

Instead of engaging a bilateral discourse and departing on the Chinese side with the potential pitfall of having to take a more culturally centred stance, this triangular framework introduces dynamism and renewed possibilities. The

instances of China–African encounters discovered and explored also enlarge. In fact, the definition of Chinese and China–Africa relations would be freed of mainland China and BRI-lead initiative to encompass a broader scope.

Even though the artists have very distinctive filmmaking and art-making practices and are devoted to disparate research topics, this general scheme of multi-vantage referencing between Europe–Africa, China–Africa and Europe–China holds true. In many of the artworks discussed in previous sections, there are also strong autobiographical references to their own experiences and encounters in the construction of the narratives. The artists' transnational and diasporic trajectories superimpose in parts with these of their protagonists and plots. The choice to weave in personal narratives permit more intimate, detailed and open-ended responses to lived experiences and observations. Had they not had these transnational experiences themselves, their creative practices could have taken another shape.

However, the process of triangulating identity does not imply a static structure of knowledge production. The artists demonstrate different degrees of familiarity and engagement about Africa. Musquiqui Chihying's work engage a wide variety of interlocutors in Africa and in Asia, from the Chinese and Africans in Africa to a Taiwanese engineer whose technological innovation carters mainly to the African market. One of Enoch Cheng's main narrative foci is the rather metaphorical and dreamlike migrant experience to and from South Africa. He employs a very poetic interpretation in his film installations but interacts more directly with African collaborators in his performances. Pu Yingwei's works depart mainly from the mainland Chinese national perspective. He has yet to inquire directly from Africa. Their identities are also divergent, coming from different regions of the Two Shores and Three Territories. This broadens the notion and understanding of China and Chinese in possible Afro-Chinese encounters outside the more narrow reference to official PRC engagements in Africa dating from the twenty-first century assumed from prevalent current journalistic discourse and concern.

Are we looking at a paradigm where today's China replaces yesterday's Europe? The Greater China region had its own trajectory and chronology of knowing Africa. These relations of engagement and cross-cultural interactions happen in a temporal and international context different than that of Europe's. However, this relationship is not devoid of controversial issues requiring further analysis and discussion. From an earlier discourse of Mao-era Afro-Asian solidarity to current day geopolitical dynamics, metamorphosing quickly in a changing world, there seems to be a gap in the narrative. For example, a People's Daily Online sponsored article in *Jeune Afrique* (2021: n.pag.) dated July 2021 for the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party goes on lengthily about twentieth-century anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles. The official narrative spends only a few sentences on diplomatic exchanges in the 1990s and stops short of delving into the current state of affairs.

Anti-Blackness, racism and discrimination are prevalent topics underlined prominently in both Pu Yingwei and Musquiqui Chihying's works. From the Afro-Asian solidarity propaganda posters (Wyatt 2017) to the demeaning representation of Black people in today's Chinese popular and social media representations (Castillo 2021), ideological and circumstantial shifts in China–Africa relations need to be addressed to understand how these issues reflect concepts and dynamics of international relations with a long-winding European colonial history behind, which should not be adopted without

scrutiny. Both China and Europe as well as their evolving relationship need to be examined to further elucidate on these issues.

Contemporary artworks with the intention of understanding the multiplicity and complexity of China–Africa relations and Africa offer a new site of knowledge and public debate production. The triangulation process, which has taken place in the art practices of these young ‘Chinese’ artists, offers a framing device that generates more nuanced debate about China–Africa relations. The transnational framework also allows for these artworks to circulate internationally in exhibitions and screenings. They break away from the dichotomy of looking from the perspective of us vs. them or the Other and try envision the global as a whole.

## GLOSSARY

Enoch Cheng 郑得恩 (b. 1983)

*Liang'an sandi* (Two Shores and Three Territories) 两岸三地

Musiquiqui Chihying 致颖 (b. 1985)

Pu Yingwei 蒲英玮 (b. 1989)

*Sunu Jappo* (*Hand in Hand*) 手拉手

Yongle tongbao (Yongle reign coin) 永乐通宝

Zhu Mingying 朱明瑛 (b. 1950)

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