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ARTICLE

Triangular System in Chinese Studies of African Literature

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Abstract

Drawing on the dynamic and historically layered relationships among Africa, China, and the West, a "triangular system" serves as an analytical framework for understanding the evolution of studies of African literature in China. Tracing a four-stage periodization reveals how Western epistemologies have shaped Chinese interpretations of African literature. At the same time, it also illuminates China's efforts to assert intellectual autonomy. A fluid, geometry-based triangulation model that accommodates multiplicity, foregrounds African agency, and fosters direct Afro-Chinese literary engagement is essential for meaningful South-South collaboration in literary studies, which must resist epistemic dependency and nationalist instrumentalization, and instead emphasize mutual learning and structural transformation.

Résumé

En se fondant sur les relations dynamiques et historiquement stratifiées entre l'Afrique, la Chine et l'Occident, un « système triangulaire » constitue un cadre analytique permettant de saisir l'évolution des études de la littérature africaine en Chine. Une périodisation en quatre étapes met en lumière la manière dont les épistémologies occidentales ont influencé les interprétations chinoises de la littérature africaine, tout en soulignant les initiatives de la Chine visant à affirmer son autonomie intellectuelle. Une triangulation fluide, basée sur la géométrie, qui s'adapte à la diversité, met en avant l'action africaine et encourage l'engagement littéraire afro-chinois direct est nécessaire pour une collaboration significative Sud-Sud dans les études littéraires, qui doivent faire face à la dépendance épistémique et à l'instrumentalisation nationaliste et mettre l'accent sur l'apprentissage mutuel et la transformation structurelle.

Resumo

Partindo das relações dinâmicas e historicamente estratificadas entre a África, a China e o Ocidente, é possível recorrer a um "sistema triangular" como quadro analítico para compreender a evolução dos estudos da literatura africana na China. Ao identificar

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uma periodização em quatro fases, podemos compreender o modo como as epistemologias ocidentais condicionaram as interpretações chinesas da literatura africana, esclarecendo-se ao mesmo tempo os esforços empreendidos pela China no sentido de afirmar a sua autonomia intelectual. Para que haja uma colaboração Sul-Sul significativa no domínio dos estudos literários, é necessário dispor de um modelo de triangulação fluido, baseado na geometria, que acomode a multiplicidade, coloque em primeiro plano a agência africana e promova o envolvimento literário direto entre África e China, resistindo-se à dependência epistémica e à instrumentalização nacionalista e, pelo contrário, enfatizando-se a aprendizagem mútua e a transformação estrutural.

Keywords: African literature; Chinese literary studies; triangulation; Global South epistemologies; South-South cooperation

Introduction

This paper proposes a "triangular system" as an analytical framework to examine the evolution of Chinese studies of African literature, highlighting both its ideals and challenges.[1] "Triangular" highlights the persistent presence of a third party in what may appear as bilateral exchanges between China and Africa. As a popular saying in Spain and Latin America goes, "there is no two without three" (Rocha 2017, 108).[2] Meanwhile, the use of "system" instead of "paradigm" emphasizes literary studies as part of a broader, interacting structure, encompassing mechanisms of translation, publishing networks, state ideology, and sociopolitical psychologies of China, Africa, and the third vertex. While the third point of reference has traditionally been the West, recent efforts have aimed to incorporate other Global South regions like Latin America or other parts of Asia into the triadic structure.[3]

Employing this triangular lens shifts the focus from a descriptive overview of existing Chinese scholarship to a more critical interrogation of how literary engagement with Africa enables China to reassess its own epistemological position in the world. It foregrounds the entangled dynamics of Western academic influence, Chinese state interests, and African cultural autonomy. In order to offer a revised genealogy of Chinese-African literary relations, I incorporate and reflect upon recent literature on triangulation, knowledge politics, and comparative epistemologies in the Global South.

The article is divided into four sections. First, I present a triangular periodization of Chinese studies of African literature. Second, I offer a theorization of the triangular system in the context of knowledge production in the Global South, engaging with scholarship from Roberto Castillo, Jamie Monson, Duncan Yoon, João Cezar de Castro Rocha, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, among others. Third, I discuss the practical applications of triangulation in translation, pedagogy, and comparative literature, as well as future goals of collaboration. Last, I discuss how to comprehend and caution against state involvement and political instrumentalization in South-South dialogues, particularly engaging with Édouard Glissant's relational model.

Triangular periodization of Chinese studies of African literature

The development of Chinese scholarship on African literature is a unique reflection of China's shifting ideological, political, and intellectual positioning

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within the global order. While Western literature has long functioned as the primary point of comparison for Chinese scholars, leading to responses ranging from emulation to rejection, cultural and literary engagement with Africa has consistently unfolded under the shadow of a third, ever-present reference point. While this third vertex is usually assumed to be "the West," a closer historical periodization reveals the layered and evolving dynamics of the triangular system.[4]

Early encounters and triangulating via African Americans (1901–1949)

Chinese academic engagement with African literature was minimal in the first half of the twentieth century. It was mainly through depiction of a shared sense of racial humiliation and anti-imperialist sentiment that the Chinese public grasped the notion of Africa and its people through the intermediary of translated American literature. The 1901 translation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Lin Shu, titled *Heinu Yutian Lu* [A Black Slave's Appeal to Heaven], is widely regarded as the starting point of Chinese exposure to African American literature, despite Harriet Beecher Stowe being a white woman. Lin Shu's renaming of the title accurately captures the Chinese sentiment of fury and confusion, as only in the previous year Beijing was sacked by the Eight-Nation Alliance following the Boxer Rebellion. The pivotal moment for the introduction of "real" African American works came with Langston Hughes's visit to China in 1933, which catalyzed translations of works by Hughes, Claude McKay, W.E.B. Du Bois, and others (Lai-Henderson 2019, 323). Yang Changxi's *Heiren Wenxue* [Negro Literature], published the same year, linked African American resistance to China's own search for modernity (Jiang 2019, 135). These early interpretations should be seen as part of the Chinese New Culture Movement, as they framed African and African American literature as part of a broader anti-colonial and colored internationalism, anticipating the ideological foundations of Afro-Asian solidarity during the Cold War. It also creates an interesting triangular imaginary in which the West served as both oppressor and transmitter of liberatory ideologies, while Africa, accessed emotionally via the African American experience, became symbolically aligned with China's emergent identity as a resistant subject in a global context.

Cold War triangles and Third World internationalism (1950s–1980s)

Following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Sino-African relations entered a state-directed phase closely linked to Third-Worldist internationalism. The Bandung Conference (1955) marked a high point of Afro-Asian solidarity, with a decolonial, plural, and relational humanism grounded in shared histories of struggle, cultural heterogeneity, and epistemic sovereignty. State-sponsored flagship journal *Yiwen* actively published translated novels, poetry, and folklore stories from dozens of African nations and colonies. However, in today's eyes, the literary works introduced then often homogenized Africa as a symbol of anti-imperialist and anti-colonial internationalism (Yuan and Zhang 2023, 153), overlooking national and regional diversity. The Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s prompted the renaming of *Yiwen* [Translations] (1953–1958) to

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Shijie Wenxue [World Literature] (1959–66; 1977 to present), reflecting "a more self-consciously China-centric approach" (Volland 2017, 165–66) in upsetting the existing structures of political and cultural power. However, Russian intermediaries remained central to China's access to African literature. The majority of African works published in *Shijie Wenxue* continued to be retranslations from Russian literary journals, but not without traces of Maoist fervor, which prompted Huang Kun to argue that in the relay process, solidarity was uneven, conditional, and 'translated' (Huang Kun 2022, 579). At the same time, it was mainly through Russian-led channels of international interactions like the First Afro-Asian Writer's Conference held in Tashkent in 1958 that the Chinese came to know many of the African writers.[5] This ambivalent reliance both reinforced and complicated the triangular system, with the Soviet Union occupying the third vertex alongside the West as common enemy as well as source of knowledge.

Another characteristic of this period was the unique dynamic between literary production, translation, and criticism. Reading foreign literature was not just for a small group of literature-lovers and academics, but also served as general education for the working class who were heralded as masters of the nation. Ordinary workers were expected to contribute to literary criticism as well as help decide what books to translate. Between 1958 and 1976, there was this unique organization of "Workers' Commentary Groups" in many state-owned factories and companies, and their reviews of books often appear as prefaces to translated literature, such as the article "Poems of Struggle and Victory" by Workers' Commentary Group of Capital Iron and Steel Company for the 1975 edition of *Mozambican Combat Poetry.* While contemporary scholars justifiably slam the heavy political messaging and lack of academic integrity (Xie 2009), this participatory model challenged the elite monopoly on literary interpretation and offers insight into alternative models of reader engagement.

The publication of the translation of Soviet scholar Irina Nikiforova's 1973 two-volume *Modern African Literature* in 1980 and 1981 signaled the beginning of more systematized academic research (Jiang 2024, 2). Particularly influential was the categorization of African literature under "Oriental Literature" together with Asian literature, a Soviet import that Chinese scholars initially adopted. According to Jiang Hui, the multiple histories of oriental literature published since 1983 were the earliest achievements by Chinese literary critics in African studies. At times, the Chinese offered localized interpretations, for instance, they emphasize Nadine Gordimer's "national consciousness" and spirit of resistance rather than the contradictions between ethics and politics highlighted by Soviet scholars (Jiang 2024, 7), but the analytical framework as well as the hypothetical interlocutor were unquestionably Russian. As for translations of literary works, the most impactful was the *African Literature Series* launched in 1983 by the Foreign Literature Press, which included works of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Richard Rive, with emphasis on the combative nature of African literary production. However, although the 1980s was a period when Chinese embraced foreign literatures with unprecedented enthusiasm and openness, the visibility of African literature remained overshadowed by global trends like Latin American magical realism and Western modernism, potentially signaling the waning of Third-Worldist internationalism.

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Neoliberal drift and theoretical aphasia (1990s–2000s)

China's market reforms and the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a reconfiguration of the triangular system, with the West now firmly occupying the third vertex. Symbolic was Li Yongcai's 1991 translation of Leonard Klein's *African Literature in the 20th Century*, which replaced earlier Soviet-influenced frameworks with country-specific analysis more aligned with Anglo-American literary scholarship. The publishing boom of the 1990s and 2000s dramatically increased translations of African literature in China, involving more than sixty publishing houses, but also revealed a growing reliance on Western consecration as a metric of literary value. Literary scholarship increasingly adopted Western theoretical frameworks, especially the postcolonial approach, with an overwhelming focus on award-winning African writers.[6] This caused some scholars to begin questioning Chinese loss of academic autonomy or "aphasia in literary criticism" (Cao 1996). Contemporary critics such as Jiang Hui and Yao Feng are now calling attention to the double alienation from Chinese epistemologies and African internal dynamics, with Yao claiming that in this neoliberal era, China's research on African literature was not only a case of "African studies without Africa" but also "African studies without China" (Yao 2023, 26).

Reorientation and the search for a Chinese voice (2010s–present)

Looking back at earlier scholarly orientations is crucial, for their traces remain palpable in contemporary academic works. For instance, Li Yongcai's histories of South African and Nigerian literatures (Li Yongcai 2009, 2022) still echo Klein's paradigm of highlighting national differences; the 2019 major project "A Literary History of Anglophone African Literature," led by Zhu Zhenwu with funding from National Social Science Fund of China (NSSFC), the country's most prestigious grant for the humanities, is another example of the historiographic emphasis characteristic of Chinese literary scholarship. Moreover, African literature and African American literature are frequently grouped together at the institutional or curricular level, suggesting an underlying structural conflation. To borrow Duncan Yoon's (2023) evocative term, these layered historical continuities form an alluvial stratum within a triangular system of literary production and knowledge formation.

This does not equal a lack of innovation in the new era. China's unprecedented economic acceleration in the 2000s fundamentally changed the mindset of politicians and scholars alike. It is no coincidence that it was soon after China surpassed Japan as the world's second-largest economy in 2010, after the 2008 Beijing Olympics and 2010 Shanghai World Expo marked the country's transformation from being a subject on display to becoming a presenter, that the Chinese government called for a reflection on their cultural and academic stances, underscoring the Four Confidences, especially Confidence in Culture, in official political discourses.[7] China now felt the need in finding their lost voice in the humanities and social sciences as well. It is now perceivable how political ideals such as the "Community of the Shared Future for mankind" and "with Chinese characteristics" have become the go-to key words in current literary studies, and under these banners how much scholarly attention shifted from Western canons

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to lesser-explored areas such as African literature. Not surprisingly, it was also in 2010 that projects related to African literature began to receive recognition by NSSFC (Huang Hui 2016, 150), and the same trend is perceivable in the number of related review articles and monographs.[8]

It is important to point out, however, that while the state's role in academic knowledge production cannot be underestimated (details to be discussed in the section titled State Involvement and Academic Agency in South-South Dialogues), nor should we disregard Chinese scholars as mere puppets, whose interest in Africa comes from their embodied experiences and genuine interest in unveiling African realities that they feel are being distorted by existing narratives. The most frequent targets of attack in Western criticism are: negligence of African literature written in indigenous languages; overemphasis on separation of politics from literary production; over-reliance on foreign postcolonial theories at the expense of Africa's intrinsic decolonial critiques and practices; and lack of interest in writing African literary histories. Jiang Hui argues that the Chinese perspective is most evident in "our steadfast commitment to the subjectivity of African literature," in contrast to the West where inventions of broader terms "undermine the legitimacy of 'African literature'" (2015, 61). Li Dan in turn points out the unconscious cultural superiority in many Western studies that view African literature as a subordinate branch of Western literature, neglecting indigenous African artistic value and humanistic sensibilities (Li Dan 2021, 96–97).

These scholarly interventions have culminated in a series of articles published in prominent Chinese journals by Zhu Zhenwu and his team, who actively push for the establishment of a new discipline that he calls Chinese African-literaturology (Zhu and Li 2022). While this effort seeks to construct a distinctive framework rooted in Chinese historical and ideological conditions, it also raises important questions. Can a nationally framed "literaturology" avoid reproducing the very academic hierarchies it aims to resist? To what extent does this formulation enable genuinely reciprocal dialogues with African scholars? To foster polyphonic South–South exchanges rather than simply invert existing hierarchies, this mostly internal discussion needs dialogue with international academia, which has been obstructed by language barriers and weak Afro-Chinese academic infrastructure. The widening gaps between Chinese, Western, and African scholars underscore the urgency of revitalizing the triangular system as a dynamic and reciprocal mode of knowledge production. As shown in the historical survey, a triangular dynamic has always been at play in Chinese literary interactions with Africa, notwithstanding the shifting perception of which West occupies the third vertex.[9] A triangular system is by essence constant renegotiation in the ever-evolving but sometimes-distorted geometry of knowledge flows, and true innovative potential lies in moving toward South-South comparisons.

Theorizing the triangular system as fluid geometry

In the current stage of Chinese engagement with African literature, a central task is to critically examine the enduring influence of the West(s) on both African and Chinese literary studies. Only through such reflection can scholars begin to

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imagine a genuinely South-South intellectual framework. As Jiang Hui perspicuously notes, "our study of African literature does not start from African literature itself, but from the study of African literature in the West. Our materials, topics, methods and research objectives are all influenced by the West" (2019, 127–28). This inherited dependency risks reproducing critiques that are neither fully African nor Chinese. Zhu Zhenwu refers to current formation as a "triangle of the Other," wherein both China and Africa are othered by the West and largely recognize each other through Western mediation (Cheng and Zhu 2023, 6). Nevertheless, the "triangular system" proposed here is not merely descriptive but aspirational, as it also envisions an evolving geometry of dynamically interconnected positions. The absent or unstable side of the triangle, which is direct Afro-Chinese intellectual exchange, represents both a structural deficiency and an opening for transformation. Once conscientized about previous dependency on the West(s), Chinese scholars are now poised to engage in more in-depth direct exchanges with African literary and knowledge production. As Li Anshan suggests in his preface to the VI HORAE Africa Series published by East China Normal University Press, such initiatives to systematically translate and study Africa are key "to understand both the Africa in the minds of Westerners and the Africa in the minds of Africans, in order to construct the Africa in the minds of Chinese people" (Li Anshan 2020, 2).

This requires a theorization of the essence of triangulation in an Afro-Chinese context, in which the scholarly attention has been focusing on the issue of race. Drawing inspiration from Claire Jean Kim's (1999) study of Asian Americans' racialization relative to and through interaction with whites and Blacks, Jamie Monson points out how whiteness is a normalized or unmarked category in Afro-Chinese interactions (Monson 2013, 6), and Lan Shanshan studies the "persistent yet invisible influence of the West" in the racial triangulation (Lan 2016, 312). Roberto Castillo puts forward the notion of "multiple triangulations" between race, gender, and geopolitics as an analytical tool (Castillo 2020, 323–24), and Lou Mo extends this geometry to analyze contemporary art, proposing a more inclusive and nonbinary global epistemology (2022, 85–87). This collective adoption of triangulation in Afro-Chinese studies is illuminating, for it grasps the uniquely layered nature of Sino-African interactions. Such insights align with Cheng Ying's emphasis on non-Western encounters providing an alternative model of "mutual gaze," "a negotiation of mutual histories and ongoing interactions" (Cheng 2019, 94), and with Duncan Yoon's idea that the "Western subject is no longer, and indeed has never been, the only Other against which postcolonial African identities conceptualize themselves" (2023, 209). These approaches implicitly embrace triangulation as a method of seeing multiple perspectives and building comparative solidarities without reifying binaries. The wide applicability of triangular thinking testifies to its fundamental challenge to existing epistemology and ways of knowledge production. For instance, Lina Benabdallah's study of Chinese "relational productive power" in Africa, which she suggests contain *guanxi* (social relations), knowledge production, and norm diffusion (Benabdallah 2020, 141), can now be perceived not as a unique product of a Confucian relational model of societies and individuals, but in dialogue with African relational worldviews under Bantu epistemologies as well (Rošker 2010; Tempels 1959).

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These conceptual affinities open space for what Brazilian comparatist Benjamin Abdala Júnior terms "solidarity-based comparisons" that explore commonalities and particularities within the Global South, rather than "comparisons driven by need" between the North and South (Júnior 1996, 89). The solidarity-based approach allows for greater autonomy, aligning with Fernanda Dusse's vision of a Global South "dedicated to building a community aware of the violence of totalization and willing to embrace differences" (Dusse 2019, 167). Such efforts also foster "cross-cultural translation" as proposed by Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos in the uphill battle against Western "epistemicide" (de Sousa Santos 1999, 283) and the prevalent "abyssal thinking" which divides the world through imaginary, polarizing lines, rendering the other side to "disappear as a reality, to become nonexistent, or even to be produced as nonexistent" (de Sousa Santos 2010, 32). In this framework, Afro-Asian literary exchanges become a means of recovering lost intellectual agency and resisting the global structures that delegitimize subaltern thought. Whereas Boaventura primarily advocates for understanding and trust among social groups across countries, Afro-Asian interactions among writers and literary scholars form a collective force capable of reshaping the global order, especially considering the seminal role that writing still plays as a privileged form of expression in many African contexts.

As Chinese studies on African literature increasingly recognize the triangular nature of its mode of operation, it becomes clear that theoretical constructions of interactions among China, Africa, and the West must always remain cognizant of their mutual dependencies and comparative contexts. The next step involves actively leveraging the geometrical fluidity of the triangle to introduce fresh theoretical insights and practical approaches, thereby deepening our understanding of South-South relationships. In revisiting the triangle's geometric attributes, contributions from the Portuguese-speaking world are especially pertinent, not merely due to the distinctive socialist histories of Portuguese-speaking Africa within Sino-African interactions, but also because *lusofonia*'s ambiguous relationship with the West offers critical insights into alternative possibilities for triangulation.

A triangular system offers valuable geometric metaphors to rethink global epistemology. First, unlike a linear model of center-periphery, a triangle has multiple internal centers. Africa ideally should be central in African literary scholarship, but material asymmetries in global publishing and funding limit this. Thus, the triangle helps conceptualize both internal diversity and external imbalance within systems of knowledge production. To counter the academic hegemony of the West and the outdated notion of the West as sole provider of theories, it is essential to engage in mutual learning from other Global South regions. For example, João Cezar de Castro Rocha's model of "emulative poetics," rooted in Brazil's negotiation of European and US influence, resonates with China and Africa's shared struggle to balance external discourses and internal agency, as his assertion that "the contemporary world is, by definition, a world that multiplies, almost infinitely, and at various levels of complexity, triangular relationships" (Rocha 2015, 55) is highly relevant to the current discussion.

This geometry is not just theoretical. Angolan author Pepetela (2011) rebuked BBC's criticism of China's investment in Africa, seeing it as creating new bargaining

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space for Africans vis-à-vis the West—not necessarily as a threat, but as an additional option for asserting autonomy. In literary production, this means African writers may gain new platforms and readers, while also renegotiating the constraints imposed by Western publishers and markets. One example is how some African photographers have turned to Chinese printing factories to significantly reduce the cost of their books and make them more accessible to domestic audiences (MacGarry 2024), transforming the author-reader relationship in the process.

While Rocha highlights both the productive and problematic aspects caused by the interplay of influences, his main argument is that the creative potential of triangulation lies in its invitation to compare, borrow, and co-author across traditions, as nonhegemonic cultures excel precisely because of their emulative creativity and openness to plural sources (Rocha 2017, 32–33, 199–200). As Angolan writer José Eduardo Agualusa claims in his novel *Os vivos e os outros* [The Living and the Others], the *alegria de efabulação* (joy of storytelling) "has largely been lost in much of contemporary European literature, but not here, in Africa. We, as a general rule, still love to tell stories" (Agualusa 2020, 84). While Western and Chinese publishing industries increasingly depend on multimedia forms like audiobooks and short videos of book reviews (BookToks) in social media platforms to counter declining sales of print books, Africa's vibrant oral storytelling tradition could inspire profound reflections on literary form and essence.

Second, the triangle does not presume equal closeness/interrelatedness among the three vertices. While it is aesthetically and morally intuitive to chase the model of the equilateral triangle, which would appear to be the most stable, in reality triangles exist in all shapes and sizes, and triangular thinking demands a pragmatic recognition of unequal ties. The Sino-African link remains far less institutionalized than either's connection to the West. Hence, solidarity must be critically engaged, not romanticized. For example, Yuan Mingqing and Zhang Lifang challenge the central position of nation-states and the heavy reliance on institutionalized visits in Sino-African cultural exchanges during the Cold War, citing how Mau Mau veteran Gitu Kahengeri, who visited China in 1964 as President of the Kenyan Writers' Union, revealed he fabricated the institution and title to meet Chinese imagined ideals of literary-political unity (2023, 149). Jiang Hui also stresses the need to establish the "possibility of comparison," seeing China's study of African literature as a dialogue between two historically shaped subjectivities (2017, 75). He argues that African literature's contradictions, linguistic diversity, and postcolonial dependency resist simple analogies with Chinese literary history (2017, 65–66). Yet, these differences also open dialogue. For example, some African scholars are appealing to China's Confucius Institute to offer help in preserving African languages and cultures in addition to the promotion of Chinese (Ihuoma 2024), signaling how triangulation can be reappropriated for shared intellectual empowerment.

Third, triangular thinking also offers a critical insight: between any two points, there exists another path. Echoing Robert Frost, taking this less-traveled pathway makes all the difference. This imagination of an alternative possibility is crucial in dismantling the entrenched identification of universality with the West. Sonia Miceli underscores the importance of "frontier and triangular

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thinking, attentive to pluralities and unforeseen and unpredictable connections" (Miceli 2019, 101). For instance, Cheng Ying traces her interest in contemporary popular performance culture in Nigeria to her "own struggle with the retreat of youth from the public sphere in China in the past three decades" (Cheng 2021, 142). This forced retreat has traditionally been viewed through ideological competition between China and the West, but going through African theatrical practices allows Cheng Ying and her students deeper insights into African, Western, and their own sociopolitical experiences. Hence, she goes on to quote Nnaemeka, asserting that "border crossing in an intercultural context entails learning about the 'other,' but more importantly, it should also entail learning from the other" (2021, 146).

In this way, triangulation becomes not just a method of analyzing Afro-Chinese-Western relations, but a mode of critical self-reflection. It invites humility, resists totalization, and aspires to plural, co-authored knowledge. The triangular system is thus not merely an academic metaphor, but a normative vision for rethinking literary relations in a deeply unequal but potentially solidaristic world.

Triangular collaboration as practice and aspiration

The perception of the triangularity of Chinese-African literary exchanges by Chinese scholars arises from looking back at the disciplinary history as well as direct contact with African people and their works. While the introduction and translation of Soviet or American monographs on African literature in earlier stages can be seen as triangulation compelled by contextual limitations, contemporary efforts reflect more deliberate and aspirational modes of collaboration. Translation, in particular, remains the most immediate yet politically charged site of materializing triangular dynamic.

Rather symbolically, the publication of *Zheli bu pingjing* [No Serenity Here] in 2010, an anthology of translated African poems, was organized by a triangular team: Chinese poet Xiao Kaiyu, German poet Isabel Ferrin-Aguirre, and South African poet Phillippa Yaa de Villiers. Xiao's eight-year experience in Germany and contact with African poets there inspired the anthology. Albeit somewhat ironically, he resorts to the need for bypassing European mediation to gain insights into African literature from primary sources as the primary motivation for their endeavor (Batchelor 2019, 409). Still, it is important to note that the editorial team made an effort to include not only "elders" like Wole Soyinka and Keorapetse Kgositsile, but also "young voices" such as Nii Ayikwei Parkes and "unsung co-creators of literature" such as Fatima Naoot from Morocco and Veronique Tadjo from Côte d'Ivoire (de Villiers, Ferrrin-Aguirre, and Xiao 2010, iv), with a clear tendency to include more of the latter two groups. As de Villiers states in the preface, "the internet has played a major role in collecting and compiling this work, which speaks to the technological fluency of African writers" (2010, v). The image that the tripartite editorial team tries to present is a vibrant and open-minded Africa, challenging the dominant stereotype regarding the continent.

Despite its publication coinciding with the Shanghai Expo in 2010, *Zheli bu pingjing* was more a case of individual attempt at international collaboration.

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Meanwhile, institutional efforts such as the *Africa Humanities Classic Translation Series*—a joint initiative of Zhejiang Business University Press and Zhejiang Normal University inspired by the Pan-African "100 Best Books" list—reflect growing interest in bypassing Western consecration. In this way, Chinese editors attempted to reorient selection criteria toward African priorities rather than Western preferences. In tandem, the editorial team also produced an edited volume of articles on thirty African writers from the twentieth century (Bao and Wang 2016), many of whom are being translated for the first time through the initiative. This synergy between translation and literary criticism reflects a distinct feature of Chinese engagement: scholars are often expected to both research and help shape the publishing infrastructure that defines the literary canon. Moreover, recent efforts have also expanded into indigenous African-language literatures. The aforementioned VI HORAE Africa Series have launched direct translation from Swahili of an anthology of poems of Tanzanian poet Shaaban Robert (Li Anshan 2020), as well as a selection of short stories and fables from Hausa (Sun 2021), reinforced by increasing academic research on literatures from such languages (Sun 2022; Ma 2023).[10] Conversely, African publishers have begun translating Chinese literature into local languages. In 2016, Kenyan publisher Twaweza Communications released *Maneno Ya Moto Kutoka China*, a Swahili-language collection of poems by the ethnic Yi Chinese poet Jidi Majia.[11] These bilateral translations point toward a slowly emerging infrastructure of mutual exchange.

However, as Catherine Gilbert (2016) notes, mutual translations still lack a coherent strategy and channel, and direct collaboration between Chinese and local African publishers remains rare. Notably, in 2024, Zhu Zhenwu's team visited Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda—the first promotional tour in Africa for Chinese work on African literature—signing cooperation agreements and translation memos with local literature bureaus and writers' associations. Such efforts suggest that China's approach to African literature may be evolving from domestically oriented scholarship to more dialogical and field-based inquiry. At the same time, it is important to critically assess the true nature of these partnerships. African counterparts should not be symbolic participants in Chinese-led projects, as sustainable South–South cooperation demands not only mutual visibility but also mutual agenda-setting. Future collaborations will depend on the creation of long-term institutional relationships that combine research, publishing, and pedagogy in order to answer some difficult questions: what kind of African literature should get translated and studied? How could the reading activities of African literature in different regions connect with African writers, and more importantly, African people? Can foreign publishing houses find a third road to African literature that is neither political nor market-oriented, which is more suitable for this digital age? How do we make African literature an integral part of the ongoing global debates on, for example, environmental protection, care for the underprivileged, and preservation of linguistic and cultural multiplicities?

Revisiting the historical triangular trajectory of Chinese studies of African literature may prove critical to answering these questions. Workers' commentary groups and their role in the reception of foreign literature in the 1960s and 70s offer a historical parallel to today's participatory reading cultures. Online

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platforms for web fiction in China now feature immediate reader feedback that shapes narrative development, a model that may inspire new forms of Afro-Chinese co-authorship and engagement, especially if we were to accept that a major tension in African literature is in the distance between Western critical preferences and African domestic interests. The collective authorship of literary translations and commentaries during the Cultural Revolution, with all its drawbacks like the disregard for individual agency and lack of accountability, serves also as a challenge to the very foundation of the Western model of literary production. There is still much to be done in the same vein of comparing Chinese practices with the preference for anonymity or plural authorship in the English journal *The Call* by the Colombo-based Afro–Asian Writers' Bureau (Yoon 2015), or the anonymous contributions of later prominent writers like Mia Couto in national theater in the 1980s (Madureira 2016).

Examples from African literature similarly challenge Western models of singular authorship. The distinct African literary tradition that emphasizes agency by each narrator during storytelling is echoed in a recent collaboration between Mia Couto and José Eduardo Agualusa in (Elegant Terrorist and Other Stories) (2019) without specifying who wrote which parts, embracing a more communal, narrative-driven poetics. Agualusa describes such collaboration as an effort to create "a third universe, which is the sum of both our worlds" (Silva and Telles 2022, 4). As Angola and Mozambique both emphasized collective artistic creation during their socialist phase, this attempt by Mia Couto and Agualusa can be seen as a contemporary revival of that historical collectivism, another confrontation between the traditionally community-oriented African philosophy and Western individualism. Since Angola and Mozambique share with China similar histories of armed struggles, civil wars, experiments in socialism followed by openness towards neoliberal capitalist ideas, and so on, there has been development in Chinese studies of Angolan and Mozambican literary works and the underlining philosophy. Studies of Pepetela, Henrique Abranches, and Ruy Duarte de Carvalho's proposal of Animist Realism as the most African way of expression (Wang 2025a), and "terrorists" that are in fact misunderstood and even framed becoming positive representatives of African identity in the works of Pepetela, Agualusa, and Mia Couto (Wang 2024), showcase the critical potential of Chinese scholarship on African literature.

Another emerging focus is contemporary Chinese writers' acknowledgment of the creative influence of African literature, and how traditional disciplinary boundaries between Chinese literature and foreign literature, literary criticism and creative writing, are being reshaped. This is partly a response to the drifting apart of the circles of literary production and criticism in China, following the institutionalization and the supposedly scientific way of training literary critics. Previously, much of Sino-African literary exchanges escaped the attention of scholars because most critics of foreign literature come from a background of foreign languages and lack proper training or vision regarding Chinese literature. However, if Chinese scholars were to maintain the "consciousness of subjectivity" (Yuan 2022, 135) that many adherents of the Chinese discipline on African literature repeatedly emphasize, it is paramount to familiarize themselves with the domestic literary scene and especially the direct

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connections between Chinese and African writers and their works. In fact, some of the most well-known Chinese writers have expressed how their writing and creative mindset have been influenced by African literature. Novelist Qiu Huadong has commented on the influence of Ben Okri, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Maryse Condé, crediting the "strange and fantastical imagination of African literature" as fundamental in reshaping his writing to create his own understanding of history (Qiu 2023, 7). The aforementioned ethnic Yi poet Jidi Majia similarly states his debt to literary giants of the Négritude movement, such as Léopold Sédar Senghor and David Diop, even claiming that "Africa has been thrice the object of my keenest attachment, emotional, intellectual and poetic" (2014). Jidi Majia also has been organizing the Qinghai International Poetry Festival for nearly a decade, which has bonded poets from all over the world including Nigeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, and others. There needs to be more studies on the impact of initiatives like literary festivals or writer residence programs on literary exchanges, and their potential for inspiring Sino-African joint writing programs. As Jiang Hui states, the only way for Chinese scholars on African literature to innovate is to:

> [D]raw nourishment from the experiences and research of modern Chinese literature, starting from our own experience, to engage in a broad dialogue with literary modernities beyond the West, and to form a general knowledge of Third World literature based on this foundation. (2020, 12).

Triangular thinking also helps broaden the topics of Chinese scholarship. While the representation of Chinese people and culture in African texts is of natural interest for Chinese researchers (Ling 2022), issues like the global history of material exchanges could also benefit from a Chinese perspective even when China is not explicitly invoked. As Mozambican writer João Paulo Borges Coelho puts it, Africa's relationship with history is globally significant, because many second-hand items end up in Africa before becoming part of human history (Duarte 2022, 14–15). As the largest manufacturer of consumer goods, China's recent transformation from a country of cheap labor to world leader in high-tech industries, and the life experiences of Chinese scholars with these commodities, put them in an advantageous position to use these embodied experiences to discuss related topics of material production and circulation in African literature. Even when the things in question are not specifically made in China (e.g., João Paolo's 2022 novel (Museum of Revolution) mainly deals with the journey of a Japan-made Toyoka Hiace), Chinese scholarship is still poised to delve into the interconnectedness of material circulation and social values and identities (Wang 2025b). Cheng Ying summarizes it best: "research is the process for me to go towards others, as well as going from others towards myself" (2023, 15). Chinese studies on African literature need more of these two-way journeys in a globally triangular context because in today's world, all interactions of people and things are a global encounter, all localized reflections should be regarded as universal contributions, and the triangular mindset helps Chinese scholars engage in dynamic and meaningful knowledge production with Africans about Africa.

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Ultimately, the triangular model underscores that translation, criticism, and teaching must operate in tandem to produce a more inclusive literary ecosystem. The goal is not merely to "study" African literature, but to engage it in co-constructed, multilingual, and mutually transformative ways. To achieve this, institutional structures must evolve to support this triangular vision. The Doctoral program in Developing Country Studies launched in 2011 at Tsinghua University has sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa/West Asia as two of its six targeted regions.[12] While pioneering in mandating African fieldwork, this multidisciplinary program still excludes literary studies as a serious object of empirical inquiry. Expanding such programs to encompass literary fieldwork would allow Chinese scholars to move beyond textual analysis and directly engage with African writers, publishing houses, and readership. Another way of implementing the triangular system and for such academic collaborations to bear fruit is through co-developed curricula between Chinese and African universities. In 2019, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences launched the China-Africa Institute, which facilitated the signing of bilateral pacts and memorandums of understanding between nine African universities and seven Chinese counterparts, with special focus on academic collaborations in the humanities and social sciences (Waruru 2019). This is a promising start for more substantial academic collaborations between China and Africa. The growing number of African students and scholars in China also offers underutilized potential for co-creating research agendas and joint teaching platforms. Due to the stricter procedure of approval for hosting academic conferences in China if involving participants of other nationalities, direct dialogue between Chinese and African scholars has not been made available to the fullest extent.

State involvement and academic agency in South–South dialogues

This ultimately leads to the question of state involvement in Chinese knowledge production about Africa. It is necessary to recognize the entanglement of the economic, political, and the cultural in China, partly due to the embrace of Marxist economic ideas as base, and culture and politics as superstructure. But while complete untangling is impractical, drawing attention to cultural and literary exchanges between China and Africa is still beneficial, as they represent an underexplored form of agency that crucially needs rebalance.

It is important to recognize that knowledge production in China, especially in the humanities, is often closely tied to state institutions, and funding bodies such as the NSSFC and the National Publication Foundation play a central role in supporting projects like the *Africa Humanities Classic Translation Series* or Zhu Zhenwu's "Chinese African-literaturology" initiative. However, equating state funding with political co-optation oversimplifies the motivations of Chinese scholars and obscures the complexities of intellectual life in a state-influenced academic environment. For instance, state sponsorship is often crucial in circumventing market logics to promote commercially less attractive enterprises. Édouard Glissant's idea of creolization and poetics of relation, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos's theory of "epistemologies of the South," remind us that the key

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question is not whether power structures exist, since all knowledge production is embedded in them, but whether these structures permit multiplicity, translation, and relational thinking rather than enforcing unilateral narratives (Glissant 1992; de Sousa Santos 2010). In this spirit, Li Anshan envisions a global academia based on decentralization, plurality, and collaboration (Li Anshan 2023, 27). For Li, Chinese scholarship should not replace Western hegemony with Sinocentrism, but concentrate on Africa-centered topics highlighting Africans' historical agency (Li Anshan 2023, 19). Liu Shaonan and Xu Liang concur that Chinese African studies should not aim to dominate African studies, but China can contribute by relying on the richness and multilayered nature of China–Africa interactions, with Chinese enterprises, migrations, and infrastructure providing natural entry points into broader African contexts (Liu and Xu 2024, 60). These studies prove that emphasis on African agency and leadership, together with in-depth research on Sino-African interactions and similarities, are the two major concerns in current African studies in China. While sticking to Chinese perspective in an equal dialogue, scholars also warn of the danger of Chinese exceptionalism and condescending preaching, which falsely base their analysis on the foundation that Chinese scholars are naturally objective and neutral judges between the West and Africa because of the lack of Chinese colonial involvement on the continent. Liu and Xu draw a parallel between this self-imposed impartiality with how British scholars viewed themselves as neutral arbiters between Africans and colonial officials in the early twentieth century, and how mid-century American scholars believed that their American identity allowed them to remain entirely neutral between the colonial powers and the colony (2024, 60). This caution against ethnocentric biases is testament to Chinese scholars' serious self-reflection about the pursuit of objectivity? The triangular mindset in Chinese research does not equal to China standing outside the triangle as arbitrator, rather it calls for a more panoramic understanding of the intricate relationships between multiple perspectives and multiple mirrors for a more panoramic self-understanding. "Never ever presume to tell us what is 'wrong with us' and how we can 'fix ourselves'"; "We are not on some train headed toward your version of the world" (Macharia 2015). Although these pieces of advice from Kenyan scholar Keguro Macharia were originally aimed at select Western researchers, Chinese scholars have repeatedly found it instructive. Just like how Chinua Achebe views the "crisis in the soul" as Nigeria's biggest challenge (Nkosi et al. 1972, 7), and how Mia Couto views Mozambique's underdevelopment as its "inability to generate productive, bold, and innovative thinking" (Couto 2009, 29), the struggle for intellectual autonomy and identity design is the main driving force for a lot of African writing, and the majority of Chinese scholars with knowledge of their nation's own historical struggles fully respect Africans' right to reclaim their own history and voice.

This is not to claim that political agendas do not interfere with Sino-African literary interactions. Chinese publishers have occasionally prioritized the works of African diplomats and officials for translation, not necessarily for readership impact, but for use as diplomatic gifts (Batchelor 2019, 8). Similarly, poetry festivals may reflect geopolitical alignments more than literary judgment. The 2024 International Youth Poetry Festival, focused on the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), exemplifies such strategic alignments,

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featuring African poets selected based on political bloc membership rather than literary merit. Nonetheless, it would be reductive to dismiss these events outright. They can create spaces for interaction, experimentation, and unexpected resonance—what Édouard Glissant (1992) calls "poetics of relation." The key is to ensure that these encounters are not bounded by state scripts but open to plural meanings and authorship. Concerns about state-driven knowledge production must be situated within a broader historical context in which all forms of institutional knowledge—Western included—are politically embedded. The challenge for Chinese scholarship on African literature is not to deny the state's involvement, but to actively cultivate spaces of intellectual plurality, critical distance, and transnational dialogue that prevent any one narrative—whether Western or Sino-centric—from becoming totalizing. As Édouard Glissant reminds us, the world is made up of infinite fluid relations, which are "not made up of things that are foreign but of shared knowledge" (1992, 8), and "in Relation the whole is not the finality of its parts: for multiplicity in totality is totally diversity" (1992, 193). In the context of Chinese scholarship on African literature, this insight offers a powerful alternative to both instrumentalist state narratives and the demand for total transparency or ideological alignment. Glissant's idea of the unpredictable nature of creolization is reflected in Afro-Chinese literary encounters, which may manifest as assemblages, reinventions, and collages, forms that resist full absorption by any national will. By embracing opacity—accepting that African texts, histories, and epistemologies may not be fully legible within Chinese frameworks—scholars can move beyond appropriation toward mutual recognition through difference. In this light, the triangle is not just a metaphor but a call to action: to forge new lines of relation, to respect multiplicity, and for literature to transform one another without collapsing difference.

Conclusion

Chinese scholarship on African literature is at a critical juncture. The evolving triangular dynamics among China, Africa, and the West(s) have both constrained and enabled literary engagement. The triangular system provides a lens to understand past dependencies, present complexities, and future possibilities. It underscores the need to reframe Chinese literary studies of Africa as more than a response to Western paradigms or a tool of national soft power, but a decolonial and solidaristic practice rooted in mutual respect and multilingual exchange.

This will require deeper fieldwork in Africa, critical interrogation of Western and African intellectual traditions, and a rethinking of China's own literary institutions and epistemic structures. To avoid a closed echo chamber, Chinese scholarship must engage across languages and contexts. The triangular model should move beyond geopolitical binaries to foster plural, dialogical, and transformative knowledge production.

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Notes

1. "China" in this article refers primarily to mainland China, and "Chinese scholars" to those of Chinese nationality with strong affiliation with Chinese academic institutions. This restriction is applied to better navigate the power dynamics between national guidance/interference and knowledge production regarding Africa in contemporary PRC, and should by no means be intended as disregard for the pluralities that naturally come with such designations. For instance, while I applaud Lou Mo (2022) for looking into a more nuanced perspective of China-Africa relations by studying three artists from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, it is not feasible to weave such considerations into this particular article.
2. All translations from languages other than English are mine.
3. I follow Stuart Hall in regarding "West" as "a historical, rather than geographical, construct" (Hall 1993, 186), and the "West versus Rest" mentality is somewhat echoed in the popular Chinese mindset of "*Zhongguo* (China) versus *Waiguo* (foreign countries)." In the article I attempt to also showcase the different part of the West upon which the Chinese gazes the most in different time periods. As for the term "Africa," I am well aware of the much-criticized stereotype to view Africa as a country, but the comparability between the African continent and China lies in their respective discursive positions and roles within global systems of power, knowledge, and representation, rather than geographic size. I also use Sino-African and Afro-Chinese interchangeably, without any implication on the leadership in this relationship.
4. There have been other attempts at periodizing studies of African Literature in China. Tan Huijuan and Luo Lianggong (2016, 646) adopt a two-stage division: "period of translation and propaganda" (1901–76) and "period of translation and study" (1977–present). Yu Jingyuan (2025, 2) instead uses a three-phase division: 1950s and 1960s; 1980s to 1990s; and from the beginning of the twenty-first century to the present. In comparison, my periodization emphasizes the triangular forces at work, and also highlights 2010 as a turning point both in terms of state intervention and academic consciousness.
5. The shift of leadership from India in the 1956 Asian Writers' Conference held in Delhi to the USSR in the 1958 Tashkent conference is illuminating, as it shows the often-invisible struggle of cultural diplomacy in the Cold War settings.
6. As of 2016, among the 887 papers regarding specific African works or writers written in Chinese, the five most popular writers accounted for 75 percent of the total, namely J.M. Coetzee (445), Nadine Gordimer (73), Chinua Achebe (70), Naguib Mahfouz (69), and Wole Soyinka (1934), all of whom having been awarded the Nobel Prize. See Huang Hui (2016, 147–48).
7. The first Three Confidences (Confidence in Path, Confidence in Theories, and Confidence in System) became a central theme. They are political concepts put forward by Hu Jintao, then General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee, in November 2012. Since 2014, Xi Jinping has proposed adding "Confidence in Culture" to form the Four Confidences.
8. See Li and Jiang 2016 for a review of the development of studies on African literature in different Chinese universities, and Yu 2025 for a summary of the most representative criticisms of the period.
9. While the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were generally considered the opposite of the West in Cold War geopolitical settings, the intellectual position was far more ambiguous. See, for example, Groys (1992).

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10. China had previously published literary anthologies in African languages, but they were mainly used as textbooks for university students majoring in such languages and not aimed at the general public.
11. Unfortunately, this collection of poetry was not a direct translation but still used the English translation as an intermediary.
12. The program requires all students to spend the first one or two years in Tsinghu, then no more than one year of course work at a prestigious research university in the West, and at least two years of research in a selected developing target country before returning to defend their doctoral dissertations. The program justifies such arrangement as a way "to train researchers to undertake in-depth research on developing countries or regions, making use of international perspectives and approaches, and a thorough understanding of state-of-the-art academic theories and methodologies" ("Introduction to Doctoral Program," iias.tsinghua.edu.cn.). Nevertheless, special care should also be taken not to resort solely to the West for theoretical guidance.

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