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ARTICLE

Reflexivity as Method, or Reading Africa from China

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Abstract

Transnational cultural encounters between Africa and China, such as Chinese artist Pu Yingwei's exploration of Kenya's dam infrastructure and the reception of French-Senegalese director Mati Diop's film *Dahomey* on African artifact repatriation among Chinese youth, generate new sites of knowledge circulation and epistemic inquiry. These exchanges exemplify an approach of "reflexivity," which emphasizes critical reflection on one's own positionality, research processes, and the broader conditions shaping knowledge production. Oriented toward mutual reference and epistemic affinity between Asia and Africa, this approach promotes a relational mode of knowledge-making attentive to both shared historical legacies and existing structural disparities.

Résumé

Les échanges culturels transnationaux entre l'Afrique et la Chine, illustrés par l'exploration des infrastructures de barrage au Kenya réalisée par l'artiste chinois Pu Yingwei, ainsi que par la projection du film de Mati Diop consacré au rapatriement des artefacts africains par la jeunesse chinoise, engendrent de nouveaux espaces de circulation du savoir et d'investigation épistémique. Ces échanges mettent en lumière une approche de « réflexivité », qui souligne l'importance d'une réflexion critique sur sa propre positionnalité, ainsi que sur les processus de recherche et les contextes plus larges qui influencent la production de connaissances. Axée sur la référence mutuelle et l'affinité épistémique entre l'Asie et l'Afrique, cette approche favorise un mode relationnel de production des connaissances qui englobe tant les héritages historiques communs que les disparités structurelles présentes.

Resumo

Os encontros culturais transnacionais entre África e a China – como a exploração, feita pelo artista chinês Pu Yingwei, das infraestruturas das barragens no Quénia e a receção entre os jovens chineses do filme de Mati Diop sobre a repatriação de artefactos africanos – criam novos locais de circulação de conhecimento e de investigação epistémica. Este

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intercâmbio é exemplificativo de uma abordagem de "reflexividade", a qual põe em evidência a importância da reflexão crítica sobre o nosso próprio posicionamento, os processos de investigação e as condições mais abrangentes que moldam a produção de conhecimento. Orientada no sentido da referenciação mútua e da afinidade epistémica entre a Ásia e a África, esta abordagem promove um modo relacional de produção de conhecimento centrado quer nos legados históricos comuns quer nas disparidades estruturais existentes.

Keywords: reflexivity; Africa-China; historicization; situated knowledge; epistemic affinity

In May 2024, Mati Diop's film *Dahomey*, which addresses the theme of African artifact repatriation, was screened at the Beijing International Film Festival. Recognizing the film's relevance to our course on African Cultures and Societies, I arranged a group viewing for my students. The screening of the film took place on Beijing's Xueyuan Road, an area densely populated with universities, where the primary audience was young students. At the end of the screening, the theater erupted into prolonged applause. This is not common in Beijing's film viewing culture, especially for a theatrical film with a runtime of only sixty-eight minutes.

After the screening, my students and I began discussing the film's details, eager to share and process what we had just watched. Without much thought, we headed to the McDonald's next door, to continue our conversation. I later invited the students to write down their responses for a special issue of *African Studies Telegram*, a weekly column that I co-edit, to share new researches and fieldwork observations with Chinese scholars in African studies. While reviewing their submissions, I was struck by a remark from Cui Haotong, a first-year graduate student in my class, who wrote:

> As I watched the film, the discussions between the Beninese students in the film and those in our own seminar echoed in my mind, creating a profound resonance across distant spaces. It felt as if our shared exploration of the same topic brought us together, sitting side by side, rather than merely looking at each other from a distance.[1]

As an educator, I deeply value this reflection on "sitting side by side, rather than looking at each other from a distance." It captures a moment of situated resonance, where discussions on artifact repatriation and knowledge decolonization among Beninese students connected profoundly with their Chinese counterparts. This resonance gestures towards a form of epistemic affinity not rooted in essentialized notions of common identity or geographic proximity, but cultivated through a dialogical engagement shaped by shared sociopolitical concerns and lived experiences.

Given China's own history of cultural artifacts lost during periods of foreign occupation, it is understandable that Chinese students might identify a shared struggle with African societies in reclaiming their cultural heritage. Yet what resonated most in our classroom was a scene from Diop's film depicting a heated

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debate at the University of Abomey-Calavi—on the repatriation of artifacts and the wider imperative to decolonize knowledge production. This moment sparked deeper conversations among my students, encouraging them to reflect critically on their own presence (and absence) in public debates concerning contemporary Chinese society and Africa-China interactions.

In this article, I describe this process of knowledge exchange as a practice of "reflexivity," and illustrate how Chinese researchers can draw on this approach to critically reexamine their engagement with African studies and Africa-China relations.

Drawing on contemporary artistic and pedagogical practices, this article examines how knowledge circulates between Africa and China through the activation of situated historical and social contexts. The first example—Chinese artist Pu Yingwei's engagement with Kenya's dam infrastructure—shows how reflexivity as method reworks personal and collective memories of China's developmental past to reflect critically on its ongoing infrastructural projects in Africa. The second example focuses on the pedagogical reception of Mati Diop's film on the repatriation of Benin artifacts in a Chinese classroom. It highlights how reflexivity as method can be enacted through viewers' critical engagement with African knowledges, prompting them to question their own positionality and roles within public discourse. In both cases, reflexivity as method offers a compelling approach to unsettle dominant paradigms of "Western vs. non-Western" that have traditionally framed global knowledge exchanges, fostering alternative frameworks for engaging with Africa and Asia as mutually referential sites of critique, introspection, and situated action. Such transnational circulation of knowledge further underscores the generative potential of African intellectual and artistic practices—not as passive recipients of global narratives, but as active participants in reimagining cultural hierarchies and epistemic relations.

Reflexivity, as invoked here, calls on researchers not merely to reflect on their positionality, but to examine critically the broader structural and historical conditions that enable and constrain knowledge production. In the conclusion, I discuss how China's socialist legacy and its ongoing political and economic transformations—both internally and in its evolving engagements with Africa—continue to shape the frameworks through which knowledge about Africa is articulated in contemporary China. I call on scholars to situate their work within the shifting terrain, consciously positioning their own perspectives, concerns, and methods as part of the broader theoretical and epistemic exchanges between Africa and China.

Reflexivity as method

Recent scholarship has increasingly questioned dominant analytical approaches to Africa-China relations, often constrained by what scholars describe as "presentism" or "dualism" (see also Monson 2020; Lee 2021). These approaches tend to place Africa-China relations within binary frameworks and simplistic categories, such as "colonizer/colonized, Western/non-Western and domination/resistance" (Cooper 1994, 1517), thereby reproducing a "collaborationist mode of

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knowledge production" (Chen 2010, 268) haunted by the specter of imperialism. Such framing not only flattens the complexity of transnational interactions but also obscures the layered temporalities and affective registers that do not conform to these dichotomies.

In response, a growing body of work has turned to literature, art, and culture as alternative means of understanding Africa-China relations (Simbao 2012; Monson and Rupp 2013; Anthony, Simbao, and Leeb-Du Toit 2023; Yoon 2023). Duncan Yoon's concept of "the alluvial," for example, captures the sedimented, shifting temporal formations in African literary portrayals of Chinese presence (Yoon 2023, 10–11), offering a powerful critique of the "postcolonial other" as a category that flattens internal heterogeneity within non-Western societies. Flair Donglai Shi, in reviewing Yoon's work, provocatively asks: "What's more than the alluvial?"—calling for conceptual tools that not only analyze but also intervene in the unfolding realities of Africa-China relations.[2]

Building on these discussions, this article proposes reflexivity as both a conceptual and methodological lens for understanding Africa-China encounters beyond existing binary paradigms. Reflexivity here refers to the process through which knowledges are transnationally received, translated, and transformed—not merely as foreign information about "the other," but integrated through shared historical experiences and critical self-awareness of local cultural and social contexts.

To better understand the significance of reflexivity in this context, it is helpful to outline its broader meaning. While reflexivity resists a singular definition or unified mode of practice, it generally refers to the critical consideration of how researchers' positionality, methods, research processes and social conditions shape the production of knowledge. It becomes especially salient in cross-cultural and cross-regional research, where the dynamics between the self and the other are inevitably at play. While reflexivity has long been a recurring theme in the social sciences, this article does not attempt to revisit the extensive debates around the so-called "reflexive turn" (Foley 2002; Archer 2010; Venkatesh 2013; Hamati-Ataya 2013; Asch 2015; Lumsden, Bradford, and Goode 2019), but seeks instead to sketch a conceptual trajectory of reflexivity that clarifies its methodological relevance for research on Africa-China interactions.

Etymologically, "reflexive" suggests a turning back upon oneself, while "reflection" denotes contemplation that typically occurs after the event (Finlay and Gough 2003, ix; Lumsden, Bradford, and Goode 2019, 2). Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, reflexivity as a methodological concern has been a key focus in contemporary anthropology, particularly in ethnographic writing and research. As Charlotte Aull Davies (2008, 7) puts it, reflexivity refers to "researchers' awareness of their necessary connection to the research situation and hence their effects upon it." At the core of these discussions lie an ethical imperative and a self-critical stance that enable researchers to confront enduring power asymmetries between observer and observed, and to acknowledge the co-constructed nature of anthropological knowledge.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu offers a particularly generative articulation of reflexivity. Central to his sociological method is a form of reflexivity that moves beyond the inward-looking, individual-centered self-reflection often emphasized

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in ethnographic practices, and stresses the incorporation of intellectual practice into the very fabric of social theory. As Loïc Wacquant summarizes, Bourdieu insists that reflexivity must be realized through collective interrogation of the disciplinary unconscious and social conditions underpinning knowledge construction (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 41–42). This orientation towards epistemic reflexivity helps avoid reflexivity being reduced to mere narcissistic "navel-gazing" (Lumsden et al. 2019, 13) or pure "poststructuralist relativism" (Whitaker and Atkinson 2021, 18).

This structural, collective approach to reflexivity offers valuable insights into the epistemological and methodological specificities involved in researching Africa-China interactions. In what follows, I outline three interrelated lines of inquiry that such an approach may help to illuminate.

First, reflexivity calls for a *historicized* awareness of the institutional and epistemological structures that shape disciplinary norms, thus enabling a critical rethinking of the common epistemic pitfalls in current Africa-China engagements, especially the tendency to dehistoricize relationality. One prevailing tendency in dominant narratives is to frame China as a "model" (M. Davies 2008; Asante 2018; Hodzi 2020) of advanced development from the South, promoting an idea of learning from its modernization experience. From a reflexive standpoint, such a linear paradigm reveals its limits: mutual referencing should not rest on adopting "more advanced" theories, but on engaging shared yet divergent experiences of colonization and modernization, and the common concerns they produce. Chinese artist Pu Yingwei's oeuvre exemplifies this approach, as his critique of Africa-China relations is deeply intertwined with a reflection on China's own developmental path and its associated historical traumas, exposing the structural inequalities embedded not only in developmentalist logic but also in the global expansion of infrastructure as a tool of state governance.

Second, reflexivity positions teaching as a key site of knowledge production that cultivates new epistemological orientations, exploring Asia and Africa as alternative reference points beyond dominant Western versus non-Western paradigms. Drawing on feminist theorist Donna Haraway's (2023, 432) notion of affinity—as a non-essentialist, strategic alliance grounded in shared commitments and situated struggles—we can understand Asia-Africa relations not through common identity or geographic proximity, but through *epistemic affinity*.

In today's intellectual marketplace—as suggested by Dilip Menon (2014, 241)—Afro-Asian solidarity is often dismissed as "so yesterday," critiqued for "its inherent utopianism, its entanglement in Cold War politics, and its unstable politics of cross racial affinity." Yet teaching African thought in China invites a revisiting of these entangled histories, foregrounding their renewed relevance in the present. In pedagogical contexts, knowledge is most effectively mobilized when it intersects with immediate political concerns and shared lived experiences; it is through such situated encounters that epistemic affinities are not only articulated but activated. Teaching, in this sense, does not aim to assert "sameness," but begins from resonant parallels—such as comparable histories of resistance or conditions of marginality—as points of entry into deeper mutual understanding.

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Third, exploring epistemic affinity requires acknowledging the *situated* production of knowledge—not merely as context-dependent, but as a critical response that attends to the differences and asymmetries within and beyond Africa-China relations. This means engaging with the uneven, and at times ambivalent conditions that shape such encounters—conditions marked by power imbalances, contested forms of collaboration, and unequal access to resources, authority, and platforms for knowledge production. A genuinely reflexive approach requires us to interrogate not only what kinds of knowledge are produced, but also who gets to produce it, move with it, and be heard across epistemic borders. In the current landscape of China-Africa studies, we must ask: Which topics, actors, and methodologies gain visibility, and which remain peripheral? What infrastructural, geopolitical, and linguistic conditions shape these patterns of recognition and exclusion? Only by grappling with these questions can we move beyond a unidirectional, objectifying gaze toward the "researched" other, and begin to foster a relational, co-productive knowledge praxis.

"Who wants to be modern?": The politics of reflexivity in southern contexts

> What it takes to see each other as complete human beings is to allow part of ourselves to die. We literally must be outside of our bodies because our bodies carry the history of our worlds... Our biggest error is ourselves, our own history of our world, because that is our point of reference in everything we say, see, and hear. To transcend and go beyond that, one has to die. (Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese, in Feldberg 2023)

In this section, I focus on Chinese artist Pu Yingwei's *Dam Theater: I Want to Be Modern* (大坝剧场: 我想要现代), an experimental project that probes the intricate dynamics of China's infrastructure engagements in Africa. Rather than reproducing the dominant developmentalist narratives that often frame these projects, Pu adopts a reflexive and embodied approach that foregrounds the entanglement of parallel and divergent histories and lived experiences across different times and spaces. This *Dam Theater* is not a neutral stage of representation, but a space of critical self-inquiry, where Pu positions himself not as an external observer, but as a Chinese artist and citizen shaped by the very global forces he seeks to interrogate.

Pu Yingwei is among the contemporary artists who have systematically engaged with Africa-China relations in their work. Reflecting on the origins of his involvement with this theme, Pu explains how both his family's experiences and his personal circumstances inspired him to embark on these projects:[3]

> In 2013, my uncle began traveling frequently to Africa, participating in water conservancy projects as part of China's aid initiatives. That same year, I left my hometown to study in France. Most of the countries my uncle visited had previously been French colonies. Perhaps it was the photos my uncle posted daily on social media from Africa, or perhaps it was the

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> constant historical reminders I encountered in France, Africa became part of my own experience.
>
> On one hand, I tried to understand "others' Africa": How did my uncle, someone who rarely ventured beyond our small hometown, perceive such a vastly different culture upon arriving in Africa? What did his role as a Chinese water engineer, engaging with concrete communities and concrete people, mean to him within the broader context of the "China-Africa community"? On the other hand, I sought to understand "my own Africa"—the foreign experiences that shaped me, along with my personal encounters with the ideas of "civilizing" or "transforming."

The artist's uncle's experiences in Africa, coupled with the inevitable discussions of race and identity the artist himself encountered while studying in France, create a parallel reference framework that shapes his reflections on Africa-China interactions. This framework enables the artist to situate his observation of contemporary Africa-China interactions within wider global narratives and deeper historical contexts.

Dam Theater: I Want to Be Modern is one of the artist's key works in his series addressing China-Africa relations. Commissioned for the thirteenth Shanghai Biennale, *Bodies of Water*, this project focuses on China's growing presence in Kenya, specifically through the China-built Karimenu II Dam. Funded by the Export-Import Bank of China and constructed by a Chinese contractor, the dam is a flagship project in Kenya's "Vision 2030 Plan." Pu's *Dam Theater* examines the surge of Chinese infrastructure projects in Africa through the artist's autobiographical inquiry into his own and his family's experiences. The project documents not only how the dam reshapes landscapes and the social fabric of local communities, but also the experiences of the artist's uncle, Li Guiping, who traveled to Africa over eight years to participate in these projects.

Pu Yingwei's *Dam Theater* installation centers on a specially designed architectural structure inspired by the Karimenu II Dam.[4] The artist's dam blurs the line between the real and the imagined, incorporating elements from various types of dams, including arch dams and gravity dams. Its design also draws on the aesthetics of socialist monuments, evoking the monumental nature of such infrastructure and highlighting the intersection of politics and development projects. Pu Yingwei's design also implies the complex temporality of China's infrastructure projects in Africa, linking contemporary dam projects to Cold War-era socialist aid initiatives such as the TAZARA Railway and the Friendship Textile Factory (Figures 1 and 2).

Alongside this dam-like structure, the project includes a twenty-three-minute video and a large-scale painting exploring Africa-China themes, both created specifically for the installation. The video is embedded into the structure itself, with two screens set into a static gray wall where they display a narrative that blends personal storytelling with fragmented historical and contemporary references to Africa-China engagements. The video begins with a futurist fictional character, "TA," telling a story "with an accent and grammatical errors." The

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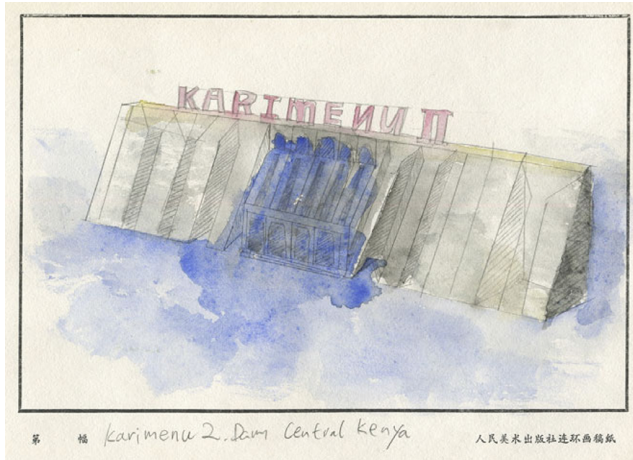


Figure 1. *Dam Theater: I Want to Be Modern* /大坝剧场: 我想要现代. Preliminary sketch of the dam project. Courtesy of Artist.

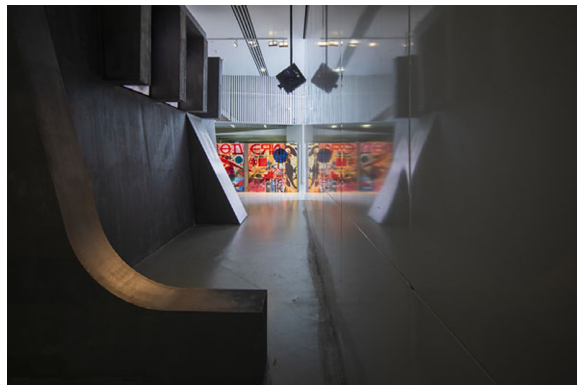


Figure 2. Image from the exhibition site *Dam Theater: I Want to Be Modern* /大坝剧场: 我想要现代. The 13th Shanghai Biennale. Courtesy of Artist.

other narrators include the artist's uncle, Li Guiping, a photojournalist who frequently travels to Africa, and a Chinese e-commerce shop owner who goes to different African countries to purchase crafts and souvenirs. The structure of the video reflects the artist's intention to turn the dam project into a collection of individual experiences from different times and places (Figures 3 and 4).

Pu Yingwei's dam architecture integrates dynamic historical and personal narratives, challenging the static, commemorative role typical of monumental forms. Traditionally, socialist monuments in China's modernization have functioned as visual tools of state power, encoding prescribed historical memory and national identity. In contrast, Pu's reimagined monument exposes social

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Figure 3. Image from the exhibition site *Dam Theater: I Want to Be Modern* /大坝剧场: 我想要现代. The 13th Shanghai Biennale. Courtesy of Artist.



Figure 4. A frame still from the video in *Dam Theater: I Want to Be Modern* /大坝剧场: 我想要现代. Courtesy of Artist.

fractures and tensions within the Africa-China infrastructural encounter, unsettling the monument's assumed authority and coherence.

If the towering, cold structure of the dam symbolizes the disembodied development strategies driven by neoliberal imperatives, the dynamic narratives embedded within the video piece foreground the embodied and affective experiences of those entangled in the project—both the Kenyan communities directly impacted by displacement and disruption, and the Chinese individuals caught up in the grand narrative of Africa-China engagement. Notably, the video piece registers local resistance to the dam project—protests over inadequate compensation, broken promises of hiring local labor, and disputes over the

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relocation of ancestral graves. Moreover, through a strategy of "audio-visual dissonance," Pu juxtaposes conflicting narratives: visuals of protesters being arrested are overlaid with audio from Chinese construction officials affirming mutual governmental support, drawing attention to the dissonant realities obscured by celebratory narratives of cooperation.

Pu situates himself and Chinese viewers within the structures he critiques, encouraging critical reflection on how individuals' life trajectories are shaped by these projects, and on their roles and ethical responsibilities within domestic and international state initiatives. Among China's many infrastructure projects in Africa like railways, roads or airports, Pu Yingwei's focus on dams evokes particularly complex feelings from the Chinese public. Large-scale dam construction has been one of the most significant and contentious topics in China's public discourse over recent decades. From the revolutionary art of the socialist construction period—exemplified by Wu Zuoren's *Yellow River Sanmenxia Dam*/黄河三门峡 in the 1950s and 1960s—to the critical interventions of contemporary artists like Chen Qiulin, Zhuang Hui, Ji Yunfei, and Liu Xiaodong responding to the highly controversial Three Gorges Dam project/三峡工程, dams have persisted as a recurring and charged motif in Chinese visual culture. Pu Yingwei's dam project may be seen, in part, as a continuation of this lineage. In this sense, the context of Chinese art history—ranging from its alignment with revolution, reconstruction, and infrastructural grand narratives during the "Seventeen Years Period (1949–1966)"[5] to contemporary art's radical responses to the transformations wrought by modernization—becomes essential for grasping the complex temporalities at play in Pu's artwork. It is through this negotiation of multiple temporal registers that the project embodies a profound reflexive methodology.

The symbolic connection between the Kenyan dam and the Chinese dam in the artwork was also once realized in a real-world exhibition context. In one of the exhibitions at START Museum in Shanghai in 2023, Pu Yingwei's *Dam Theater* was juxtaposed with another work, the signature piece of contemporary Chinese artist Liu Xiaodong, *Migrants of the Three Gorges Dam*/三峡大移民.[6] In 2003, Liu witnessed firsthand the rapid construction of the Three Gorges Dam in Wuhan, alongside the abrupt displacement of migrants, which inspired this piece. In the large painting, Liu depicts a group of workers, whose bodies are weighed down by this immense dam project. In the background, turbulent waves roll across the expansive Yangtze River, while children and pigs wander through the ruins of homes soon to be submerged, emphasizing the lack of control individuals experience in the face of sweeping national infrastructure developments.

For viewers who lived through this transformative era, encountering these works together in the same space evokes strong collective memories. Between 1990 and 2005, dam construction displaced millions, with a significant policy shift in 1999 relocating over 130,000 people to other provinces, making the experience especially tangible. I recall that some of these displaced families were resettled in my small hometown in northern China, and their struggles to adapt to unfamiliar environments and rebuild livelihoods have become my earliest and most visceral memory of migration.

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The works of Liu and Pu highlight a shared trauma of dislocation and displacement shaped by distinct geopolitical contexts, offering a powerful lens to explore the interconnected yet diverse experiences of modernization in both African and Chinese societies. These narratives compel us to question whether the processes and dynamics that defined China's rapid industrial and infrastructural transformations—with their profound social and ecological consequences—are now being re-enacted in Africa, albeit within a different global configuration of power. This interplay between distance and closeness, the other and the self, generates a liminal space where the dominant narratives of "modernization" are both reconsidered and interrogated.

As part of Pu's *Dam Theater* project, a monumental ten-meter-long five-panel polyptych titled "I Want to Be Modern" deepens this trajectory of inquiry.[7] The background of the polyptych is a montage of archival materials related to China and Africa that the artist has collected over many years: mid-twentieth century revolutionary woodcuts, street graffiti, anti-imperialist posters from Asia and Africa, Chinese propaganda promoting aid to Africa, and other visual elements reflecting resistance across different eras and regions. The background also includes real commemorative stamps, with political slogans like "Belt and Road Initiative"/一带一路 and "Revitalize the Nation Through Science and Technology"/科教兴国. At the top of the polyptych, in the most prominent spot, the artist has written the large words "I want to be modern" using his self-invented "Imperial Font" (Figure 5).

The use of this self-invented typographic style Imperial Font is worth unpacking. The font blends Chinese calligraphy with elements of both the Latin and Cyrillic modern graphic design systems, as a way of registering the important historical changes and ongoing transformations of modern China. The typography in the polyptych also aligns with the visual and narrative montage found throughout the project. For instance, in the aforementioned video piece, fragments of Chinese visual materials from different eras are intercut to produce a kind of historical montage. One scene features the artist's uncle holding a tape recorder that plays a 1970s Zairean song performed by Zhu Mingying—known for her Afro-themed performances during the socialist internationalist era. This



Figure 5. *I WANT TO BE MODERN*, Pu Yingwei. 2020–2021. Oil and acrylic on canvas, silk print, paper collage, pastel, pigment, spray paint, marker pen, stamp, national flag sticker, 200 × 1000 cm in 5 panels, each 200 × 200 cm. Courtesy of Artist.

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is juxtaposed with archival footage of Zhu singing in blackface and images of Chinese and African workers on the TAZARA Railway, evoking a moment of aspirational Afro-Asian solidarity.[8] These historical references collide with more recent, controversial footage from Chinese social media, where Africa is flattened into stereotypes of poverty and underdevelopment. In one disturbing clip, a birthday greeting video is orchestrated by a Chinese influencer and performed by local African men—an example of how African bodies are now commodified as exotic, "othered" spectacles for generating exploitative algorithm-driven digital contents.

Through Pu Yingwei's juxtaposition of radically different visual registers, including the reference to "China Capital" on the right side of the polyptych—a clear homage to China's contemporary "Political Pop" art—the *Dam Theatre* project adopts an explicitly reflexive and self-questioning stance.[9] It interrogates how China's economic rise influences not only its own trajectory of development but also its interactions with Africa, a continent whose modernization processes are increasingly shaped by Chinese investments and infrastructural initiatives.

Here, the artist's playful engagement with different visual registers invites a moment of pause and contemplation. The Imperial Font created by the artist subtly shifts the tone of "I want to be modern," transforming the affirmative statement into an ambiguous reference or a pointed question: Who wants to be modern? Amid the celebrated grand aspirations for modernity, do the voices of those displaced by dam construction find a place? How does this aesthetics of montage reflect the tensions between China's socialist revolutionary past and its present trajectories of developmentalism and state capitalism?

Today, "modernity" has become a legitimizing term in contemporary Africa-China relations, especially with it being the central theme of FOCAC 2024.[10] China's infrastructure projects in Africa are often depicted in official discourse as the "transfer of China's modernization experiences to African countries." The use of the artist's self-created Imperial Font serves as a critique of the uncritical appropriation of the discourses of modernity, informing the pervasive presence of the West on questions facing both Africa and China: Who defines modernity? Is there a singular trajectory of modernity and modernization? This probing question of "who wants to be modern" reveals the "dual consciousness of modernity" in both Asian and African societies, outlining the larger structural inequalities obscured by disparities in the often simplified, unidirectional power relations.[11]

The theme of dams, and the reflexive modernity they embody, represents a shared core concern in both Chinese and African societies, which brings to mind the insights of Lesotho filmmaker Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese, renowned for his dam-themed film *This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection* (2019). As Mosese observed, "Our bodies carry the history of our worlds... What it takes to see each other as complete human beings is to allow part of ourselves to die. We literally must be outside of our bodies because our bodies carry the history of our worlds."[12] He sharply reminds us that while our bodies are central to how we experience and understand the world, embodiment alone does not suffice for genuine empathy. What is more important—and more difficult—is the process of "dying" oneself: the necessary relinquishing of one's own perspective and experience in order to

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recognize and complete the other. To me, this captures the very essence of reflexivity. It is also what I find most compelling in Pu Yingwei's work on the Kenyan dam project. The partial relinquishment of the self, coupled with the intersubjective empathetic awareness between self and other, is foundational to the realization of an affinity that moves us forward.

Pu Yingwei's exploration of Africa-China themes emerges not only from his personal and family experiences but also from his journey of stepping beyond his own home environment to encounter the lived realities of others. Over recent years, he has embarked on what he calls a "Third World Journey," revisiting regions such as Kenya, the former Yugoslavia, and Puerto Rico. These journeys function as a critical inquiry into the shared sociopolitical and historical challenges confronting these societies, as well as an exploration of the possibilities for mutual referencing and epistemic self-examination. While this journey involved geographic movements, the epistemological work it enacts—of decentering the self and situating one's subjectivity within historically entangled worlds—is not reducible to the act of traveling itself. It is through these "displacements" and the acts of self-interrogation, that the artist allows a part of himself to "die," enabling a transformation that informs his practice.

An alternative afterlife of African art? Practicing reflexivity in a Chinese classroom

This section revisits the reception of Mati Diop's film in China, first mentioned at the beginning of this article, to offer a more specific discussion on the methodological dimension of reflexive knowledge exchange. The reflections presented here are based on my teaching experiences in China. As a Chinese researcher in African cultural studies, interacting with young students both in and outside the classroom, I have come to realize that these texts—whether originating from or about Africa—often resonate with the concerns and struggles of Chinese youth today. When thoughtfully situated within Chinese cultural and intellectual contexts, they cease to function as "foreign knowledge" in any simplistic sense. Rather, this dynamic points to a generative mode of encounter that gestures toward an affinity between African and Asian ways of knowing.

To illustrate the generative process through which such affinity emerges, I draw on my pedagogical engagement with the film *Dahomey*. As part of the teaching practice, I organized a series of events around the film, including a screening, a seminar, a field trip to an African art exhibition in Beijing, and a collective writing project.[13] These activities illustrated how the film's focus on African artifact repatriation resonated in the Chinese context and how it might intervene in ongoing Africa-China cultural exchanges.

The film *Dahomey* explores the complex processes of acquisition, display, and repatriation of African art in the West, shedding light on the enduring legacy of colonial cultural hegemony and extraction. Rather than presenting these objects as artifacts confined to pristine glass cases or hidden in museum storage rooms, the film foregrounds the dynamic, lived debates among Beninese youth who engage critically with the meanings and futures of these objects. The Beninese

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students' engaged discussions on restitution, colonial history, and decolonization of knowledge genuinely animated the artifacts, situating them within a more embodied and affective framework of ongoing historical reckoning and meaning-making.

In our discussion, the students came to understand that the portrayal of King Ghezo's spirits wandering through Cotonou was not merely a rhetorical personification of the artifacts. Instead, it symbolized the restless spirits of ancestors being summoned back, challenging decontextualized and disembodied exhibition practices, along with the histories of looting and distortion behind them. They also noted elements such as the use of the Fon language, collaboration with Haitian writer Makenzy Orcel, and contributions from musicians in Benin and Nigeria. These components were recognized as essential for expanding the discourse on repatriation, extending it beyond nationalism and linking it to a Pan-African legacy that addresses the ongoing traumas of colonialism and slavery. More importantly, as the discussion unfolded, the students' discussions of the film shifted the focus away from African artifact repatriation itself, and turned it into a means of engaging with and reflecting on the world around them.

While *Dahomey* centers on the return of looted artifacts from France to the Republic of Benin, its implications extend far beyond this specific historical and geopolitical context. A clear point of relevance lies in China's own history of cultural artifacts being looted, making the issue of restitution a visible and resonant topic in the country's public discourse. Beyond this historical parallel, however, the film also underscores current, pressing ethical stakes. As relations between China and Africa grow increasingly interconnected in the realms of trade, infrastructure, and cultural exchange, African art exhibitions have increasingly appeared in major Chinese cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. These exhibitions bring into focus the ethical challenges and intellectual responsibilities tied to the collection and display of these artifacts—questions that *Dahomey* itself powerfully confronts. Given China's own experience of the trauma of cultural loss and the displacement of its cultural heritage objects in Western institutions, how can we critically engage with the growing presence of African artifacts in China if we truly empathize with the complexities of restitution and repatriation? What does it mean to act responsibly and respectfully as collectors, curators, and researchers of African cultural heritage?

In November 2024, I organized a field trip activity where students, along with Nigerian visiting scholar Jude Chudi Okpala, visited an African art exhibition at the Tsinghua University Art Museum titled "African Art: A New Rediscovery."[14] After a guided tour of the exhibition, we held an on-site group discussion with the curator and artifact collector, followed by a class debate that allowed the students to reflect on the exhibition in light of Mati Diop's *Dahomey*.

In our on-site discussion, visiting scholar Jude Okpala's contribution was crucial in steering the conversation toward a more critical reflection on the complexities surrounding the collecting and exhibition of African art. Drawing on Andrea Fraser's metaphor of the "museum as prison,"[15] Okpala challenged students to consider museums as spaces not just of preservation, but of epistemic violence—manipulating knowledge, memories, and historical narratives of domination. While the curator and collector emphasized that the exhibition's

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core message was about "China-Africa friendship," Okpala's incisive questions pushed the students to think beyond the usual rhetoric of "solidarity" and "win-win" that often surround such exhibitions. Upon careful examination of the themes, structure, displays, and details of the guided tour, students came to see how the exhibition in China reinforced outdated and problematic understandings of African art—such as the uncritical use of terms like "primitive" and "purity," and the automatic reference to Pablo Picasso wherever African art is discussed.

When discussing the problematic hierarchical valuation of African art and its links to colonial history, the collector of these artifacts, who was also present during the discussion, avoided addressing this issue. He argued that because China lacks a history of colonizing others in Africa, there is no need to reflect on the colonial burdens embedded in African art exhibitions in the West. The collector's stance reflects a broader tendency within some Chinese cultural and political circles to resist engagement with the critical issues of colonial legacies and their impact on cultural representation. This dismissive stance risks slipping into essentialist narratives, reinforcing simplistic and static notions of "authenticity" and aesthetic "purity" in African art exhibitions in China. Such an approach ultimately hinders deeper, more critical and contextually relevant discussions that are necessary to address the complexities and ongoing realities tied to these cultural artifacts.

Drawing on the film *Dahomey* and another documentary in our syllabi, *Black Market's Masquerade*, which both explore the complex power dynamics surrounding the collection and repatriation of African artifacts, students engaged in a critical discussion that directly challenged the rhetoric of "Chinese exceptionalism" in African cultural representation.[16] As China's engagement with Africa deepens, especially in terms of economic, political, and cultural exchange, it becomes increasingly significant for Chinese institutions to examine their role in the framing and dissemination of knowledge about Africa. Rather than avoiding such critical discussions, it is imperative to draw valuable lessons from existing practices of African art collection and exhibition.

Subsequently in our class debate, I assigned the students a more practice-oriented discussion question: If we were to curate an African art exhibition in China today, what approaches should we take? More specifically, how should we address the challenges of cultural representation, avoiding stereotypes while highlighting the sociopolitical and historical contexts of the artworks? What curatorial strategies should be employed to foster more equal dialogues between African and Chinese artists, viewers, and scholars?

In their responses, the students identified several key points. Firstly, they emphasized the importance of a solid grounding in the study and understanding of African art history. This involves gaining a comprehensive understanding of the context of each exhibit, particularly how these objects were used and perceived within their local settings, bearing traces of lives, histories, and the transforming circumstances in which these objects were embedded. Some suggested working together with African curators and contemporary artists in the design and curation of these exhibitions. By learning from African artists and researchers, they argued, it would be possible to challenge the rigid standards of "authenticity" and the hierarchical aesthetic value systems often imposed on

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African arts. Furthermore, some students referenced recent and controversial Chinese art exhibitions in Europe, proposing that lessons could also be drawn from the "Orientalist" gaze commonly present in displays of Chinese art in Western museums, urging against the replication of such biases in African art exhibitions in China. Building on that, the students discussed the possibility (and danger) of juxtaposing African and Chinese artists from different regions under shared themes or cultural parallels. Some believed that such an approach could provide Chinese audiences with a unique opportunity to engage with African art through connections and similarities, rather than solely emphasizing difference and "otherness." While others brought up the potential dangers of oversimplification and cultural self-centeredness that could arise from this comparative approach, drawing on controversial exhibitions like the 1984 exhibition "'Primitivism' in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern" at Museum of Modern Art in New York (MOMA).

Throughout the discussion, it became evident that the debate scenes featuring Beninese university students in the film *Dahomey* profoundly influenced the Chinese students. When articulating their curatorial ideas in response to my question, they repeatedly referenced the critical issues of ownership and accessibility of historical knowledge embedded in African art objects, as raised by the Beninese students in the film. In light of these reflections, they further questioned: How can various media and platforms be leveraged to bring the knowledge of African art beyond conventional "white cube" spaces? This question prompted them to think more expansively about alternative exhibition formats and how digital platforms and community-based art projects might facilitate wider public engagements beyond traditional gallery walls.

When addressing the issue of curating African art in China, students also pointed to the growing exclusivity of contemporary art spaces and museums in Beijing, linking this to broader societal transformations as well as the gap of interaction between academic and grassroots African knowledge production. They observed that many of these museums and galleries, which tend to prioritize elitist notions of aesthetics and a preference for abstract art, reinforce a divide between the art world and the general public. These spaces often cater to a specialized audience, inadvertently excluding others, including the students themselves who feel out of place within such spaces. What was particularly valuable in this discussion process was how the Beninese students' deep engagement with public issues and their concern for social responsibility inspired the Chinese students to reflect on their own relationship with public space. The students also began to question how the perceived detachment of contemporary art from daily life might reflect broader shifts in China's political culture and the changing nature of its public sphere.

One of my students, Cui Haotong, expressed that she felt as though she were "sitting side by side" with the Beninese university students, sensing a deep affinity grounded in a shared feeling of unsettlement. This affinity arises not only from the unresolved historical legacies—such as the loss of material and cultural heritage due to colonial violence—but also from the contemporary marginality and precarious social realities that shape the lives of young people in both China and Africa. Confronted with these intertwined histories and present struggles, the students began to recognize parallel experiences that inform their understanding of the world, opening up a space for genuine empathy and critical inquiry.

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At this moment, as the spirits of these artifacts travel to China through the medium of film, the much-debated question of repatriation moves beyond a focus on loss and victimhood, and fosters a forward-looking vision of African epistemologies and their dynamic engagements with the world.

Conclusion: Where do we stand?

> In the era of imperialism where do we really stand? In a society built on a structure of inequality, where could we stand? Can we remain neutral, cocooned in our libraries and scholarly disciplines, muttering to ourselves: I am only a surgeon; I am a scientist; I am an economist; or I am simply a critic, a teacher, a lecturer? (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 2006, 105)

> These conditions attempt to regulate academic production into a singularity, coated with professionalism but stripped of critical concerns and political positions. The imperialist apparatus and the collaborationist desire of the colonized to catch up have ensured that the mechanisms which have evolved to shape intellectuals into professional academics are now firmly in place throughout the globe. But the rules of the game were set by the empire. Carrying with us the historical experiences of the colonized third world, we cannot allow ourselves to be swept up in the rush toward neoliberal globalization. (Kuan-Hsing Chen 2010, 268)

Scholars like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Kuan-hsing Chen have long advocated challenging global epistemic hierarchy through the mutual referencing of African and Asian knowledge systems. Building on this vision, this article has explored how artistic and intellectual exchanges between China and Africa provide concrete instances of epistemic affinity and open up space for transformative self-reflection.

In this context, reflexivity is not primarily about physical travel or mobility, but about epistemic shifts—a transformation in how knowledge is produced, situated, and related across contexts. Nonetheless, a focus on epistemic reflexivity should not obscure the structural inequalities that continue to shape the global circulation of people and knowledge—inequalities that manifest in the uneven mobility of artists and scholars, as well as in the disparate levels of institutional support granted to different regions and disciplines. As previously noted, opportunities to travel and conduct research in Southern contexts and beyond—as seen in the experiences of artists such as Pu Yingwei—are not equally accessible to all. Many African and Asian artists and scholars continue to face structural barriers to international movements. To facilitate the kinds of encounters that catalyze critical reflection, it is crucial to address these structural disparities. Within the context of African knowledge production in China, this calls for more than symbolic gestures of inclusion; it requires sustained efforts to foster meaningful dialogue and collaboration with African scholars, which might involve creating institutional mechanisms that support joint research, long-term residencies, and co-authored work, as well as developing platforms that prioritize reciprocal exchange over one-directional modes of engagement.

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Nonetheless, despite the persistent structural constraints limiting physical mobility, epistemic reflexivity is not solely dependent on such movements. In recent years, a growing number of African artists have critically engaged with China and Africa-China relations—not necessarily through physical presence, but through grounded, context-specific reflections on China's influence within their own local and regional settings.[17] Such practices remind us that epistemic reflexivity can emerge from locally grounded experiences and from efforts to navigate uneven structures of mobility. The case of Kenyan artist Michael Soi's *China Loves Africa* series—sparked by the controversial acquisition of Kenyan artists' Venice Biennale slots by Chinese artists and their agents in 2015—points directly to the kinds of asymmetries that shape global art circuits and the critical responses they can provoke. These artistic engagements compel us to rethink reflexivity not as the outcome of equal mobility, but as crutial responses to the very conditions of exclusion, displacement, and differential access.

Although Soi's work has been widely cited as a visual metaphor for Africa--China relations (indeed, it was the most frequently referenced artwork at our March 2024 Yale Africa-China Symposium in Maputo which gave rise to this special issue), few scholars have examined another paradox it reveals: despite their different positions, both African and Chinese contemporary artists often find themselves navigating the global art infrastructures that demand international—often Western—visibility as a prerequisite for recognition. This point further illustrates the complicated politics of reflexivity within Asian and African contexts. Attending to such complexity is not about surrendering to a relativism that normalizes inequality, but about acknowledging the uneven material conditions under which affinity is forged. Only by confronting these complexities can we begin to envision more situated and transformative modes of epistemic connection across Asia and Africa.

This intricate interplay of epistemic affinity and inequality within Asian and African contexts raises important questions for Chinese scholars. What is our positionality within the global system of knowledge production about Africa? How do our locations influence the extent to which we reproduce or challenge established frameworks and paradigms? Looking back over the past few decades, as the discipline has emerged and evolved within a specific geopolitical context, have there been significant shifts in how knowledge about Africa is produced and represented in our society? For the younger generation of Chinese scholars, these questions of positionality and methodology are especially urgent, as we stand at a unique crossroads shaped by the intellectual legacies of China's socialist past, its postreform economic transformations, and its increasingly prominent role within the global neoliberal order.

Tracing the historical evolution of African studies in China reveals how geopolitical shifts have influenced its disciplinary orientation and knowledge production. The Bandung Conference in the mid-twentieth century laid the foundation for China's Asian-African Studies. Rooted in Bandung's vision of non-Western, "unmediated" knowledge production, early African studies in China prioritized an Afro-Asian axis, leading to the creation of programs in African and Asian languages and literatures. Then, in the twenty-first century, African studies in China entered a "new wave" driven by the Belt and Road Initiative and the government's "going out"

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strategy. Recognized as part of the new discipline of "Country and Regional Studies/国别与区域研究," African studies gained increased institutional investment, with research centers like the China-Africa Institute/中国非洲研究院 (an institution under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) emerging. While these developments have provided resources and opportunities, they have also signified a shift in emphasis, from Bandung's Afro-Asian interconnectedness to a focus on Sino-African political, economic, and diplomatic relations. At the same time, this shift has exposed a structural imbalance: despite the flourishing of China-based research on Africa, knowledge production about China within African academic and intellectual communities remains relatively limited. Without greater support for context-specific knowledge production about China on the African continent, the Afro-Asian knowledge axis risks becoming a one-sided conversation. Addressing this asymmetry requires more investment—both material and epistemic—in enabling African scholars, institutions, and publics to engage China on their own terms, grounded in local concerns and modes of inquiry.

Given the relative prominence of Africa-China-related discussions in existing scholarship, there appears to be a discursive reorientation from "Asia-Africa" toward "Sino-Africa," partly driven by the international scholarly community's increasing attention to China's growing presence across the Global South and its role as a global development actor. Within China, the academic embrace of "Sino-Africa" framing has too often proceeded without sufficient critical reflection on its epistemological limitations, thereby risking a reduction of the evolving Asia-Africa connections to a primarily economic- and political-interest-based perspective. This framing also tends to essentialize and flatten both China and Africa, reducing them to abstract geopolitical entities. Such an approach frequently overlooks the internal contradictions and structural inequalities within China itself—including widening socioeconomic divides, regional disparities, and the social dislocations brought about by rapid modernization and urbanization.

In this context, understanding contemporary Africa-China relations requires more than just a top-down focus on diplomatic, economic and political ties, it demands a deeper exploration of the social and political transformations unfolding at the grassroots level within Africa and China. This approach highlights the need to attend to shared vulnerabilities and interconnected challenges experienced by ordinary people across these contexts, as well as the methodological value of incorporating embodied and affective dimensions into our research.

These dimensions, often overlooked in scholarship, are manifested in everyday, vernacular epistemologies—noninstitutionalized forms of knowledge expressed through bodily practices, affective responses, and informal networks of engagement. This aspect becomes particularly evident in classroom discussions with young students, who frequently highlight how they engage with knowledge about Africa through popular cultural forms, such as Afro dance collectives and short-form videos circulated on social media platforms. These informal exchanges of knowledge carry the potential to nurture new social practices and political imaginaries, revealing dimensions of epistemic affinity that transcend confines of formal academic discourse.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's incisive question, "Where do we stand?" calls for an urgent revisit of the increasingly elusive "Asia-Africa knowledge lineage" in

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Chinese contemporary knowledge production. This is not about a nostalgic longing for a romanticized Bandung past. Rather, the point is to revisit the ethical and methodological commitments it foregrounded—social justice, reciprocal engagement and recognition of alternative epistemologies. For Chinese scholars, this legacy demands sustained engagement with African intellectual traditions and engaging the shared urgencies that arise from ongoing histories of struggle.

This epistemic affinity makes possible the formation of political and affective communities—ones that work through, rather than neglect or erase the tensions of difference and inequality. It also serves as a theoretical stance that unsettles fixed categorizations, inviting us to reconsider those groups and contexts we may have previously regarded as unrelated to our own, and to rethink what *relevance* might mean in an age marked by insularity and closure. At this critical juncture, what is needed is not further fragmentation, but a patient cultivation of affinity that embraces relationality, and opens pathways toward the transformative potential of encounters.

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Notes

1. The special issue on *Dahomey* was published in the *Peking University African Studies Telegram* on June 5, 2024. See more at: https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/EfoWaD1T0AgtHj60JQ4oUA
2. In his review of Duncan Yoon's book on the Chinese in African literature, Shi (2024) emphasizes the importance of "ushering Africa-China humanities beyond the often-performative tasks of 'subverting harmful essentialisms' into concrete and effective interventions."
3. In 2018, I invited Pu Yingwei to deliver a lecture at Peking University, where he reflected on the origins of his series of art projects on Africa-China. (Text translated to English by the author.)
4. Pu Yingwei's *Dam Theater* is centred on a large, dam-shaped installation and the project also includes film, interviews, large-scale paintings, and music. It was first exhibited at Power Station of Art in Shanghai from April 17 to July 28, 2021.
5. The period from the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 to the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 is commonly referred to as the "Seventeen Years Period/十七年." The term was initially used in literary studies to describe the formation of the socialist cultural system around this period. It has recently been taken up in Chinese art history as a critical framework for examining the development of socialist visual culture and the institutions of artistic production. As both a symbol of national development and a prominent theme in art, hydraulic engineering, including dam projects during the Seventeen Years Period, offers an important lens through which to trace shifting ideologies and the changing relationship between art and politics in socialist China.
6. Liu is considered one of the most prominent realist painters in contemporary Chinese art, deeply influenced by Soviet-style realism and renowned for his ability to depict ordinary people navigating moments of drastic social transformation.
7. This is a series of five paintings (each 200 × 200 cm) forming a continuous work ten meters in length. The five panels should be viewed together as an integrated whole.
8. For a more detailed discussion of the use of "blackface" in Chinese performance culture especially performances by Zhu Mingying and Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble, see Hu (2021), Li (2022), and Suglo (2022).
9. On the right side of the large-scale painting, the phrase "China Capital" appears in bold red, its font distinctly reminiscent of the Coca-Cola logo. This deliberate design choice draws on the "Political Pop"

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movement, a key genre in post-1989 Chinese art. Known for its satirical appropriation of popular cultural and political symbols, this movement critiques the transformation of socialist ideologies during China's shift toward a market-driven economy. Artists like Wang Guangyi famously used the Coca-Cola logo as a representation of consumerism and capitalism, making it a defining symbol of the genre.

10. Here I draw inspiration from Paul Gilroy's concept of "double consciousness" in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) to describe the dual positionality of African and Asian subjects in relation to modernity: they both participate in and are shaped by modernity, while simultaneously experiencing varying degrees of marginalisation within its structures.

11. In the 2024 Beijing Declaration of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), the word "modernization" appeared a total of thirty-one times. In this declaration, modernization was emphasized as a central theme, with a focus on advancing it in the Global South, presenting China-Africa cooperation as a model for inclusive growth and framing Africa as a beneficiary of China's modernization experience.

12. See Isaac Feldberg's (2023) interview with Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese. *This Is Not a Burial, It's a Resurrection* (2019), directed by Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese, is set in a remote mountain village in Lesotho. It follows Mantoa, an 80-year-old widow whose life is disrupted by the local government's plan to build a dam and flood the village, just as she is preparing for her own death. Her powerful resistance reveals a deep connection to ancestors, land, and dignity, which resonates deeply across narratives of dam infrastructure, revealing shared struggles over displacement, memory, and the politics of development across the Global South.

13. Collaborating with the film's distribution rights holder in China, I arranged a public screening at the university for students who were not able to attend the screening at the cinema.

14. According to the curator, the Chinese title of the exhibition, "African Art: A Modern Retrospect/非洲艺术展: 现代的回望," not only highlights the richness of African art but also emphasizes the connection between the history of Tsinghua University Art Museum and its art disciplines and those of modern art institutions in Europe. This class field trip was facilitated by a former student of Peking University, Xi Jin, who is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. She introduced and recommended Professor Jude Okpala for a visit to Beijing and participation in the exhibition at Tsinghua University.

15. Andrea Fraser uses the metaphor of the "museum as prison" to reveal the deep structural affinities between two seemingly disparate institutions—both functioning as systems of social control, exclusion and inequality. This metaphor is illustrated in her project *Down the River* at the Whitney Museum in 2016.

16. *Black Market's Masquerade* is a 2015 documentary directed by Peter Heller. Focusing on the mask market in Benin, it examines how traditional African masks have been sold as both cultural artifacts and tourist goods, highlighting the complexities of their commercialization in a global market. Notably, it features an African art museum in Cotonou that was once part of a private Swiss collection, which was later acquired by a Chinese collector. Some of these pieces were subsequently included in the African art exhibition at the Tsinghua Art Museum discussed in this article.

17. In recent years, artists like Stary Mwaba, Sammy Baloji, Ayọ̀ Akínwándé, Anawana Haloba, Michael Soi, Bright Tetteh Ackwerh, Moffat Takadiwa, Godfrey Mwampembwa and many others are enriching the discourse on Africa-China relations by grounding their understanding of these dynamics in local, lived experiences.

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