

THE MYTH OF ZHENG HE: KENYA-CHINA ENCOUNTERS IN YVONNE OWUOR'S *THE DRAGONFLY SEA*

Mingqing Yuan

University of Bayreuth, Germany

The year 2005 marked the 600th anniversary of Zheng He's first voyage on the Indian Ocean and the 50th anniversary of the Bandung Conference. In the same year Mwamaka Sharifu, a girl from Lamu island in Kenya, also a descendent of sailors of Zheng He's fleet (1405-1433), was awarded a scholarship to study in her "home country". In 2019, the novel *The Dragonfly Sea* by the Kenyan female writer Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, which incorporates the story of Mwamaka Sharifu, was published by Alfred A. Knopf. By using the concept of "fictive ethnicity", proposed by Balibar, and "push back", as articulated by Ruth Simbao, this paper tries to explore how the history of Zheng He is adopted and narrated to construct, blur or refute boundaries of nation and ethnicity in *The Dragonfly Sea*. It also investigates how fictional writing, both aesthetically and culturally, intervenes and responds to the dominant discourses surrounding "China-Africa" by exhibiting the ambiguity and nuances within. It shows that an epistemological and discursive fracture exists between Africa and China that leads to a binary construction of the myth of Zheng He, which might be effective to some degree but runs the risk of repeating nation-state and ethnic configurations.

KEY WORDS: ZHENG HE, CHINA-KENYA LITERATURE, FICTIVE ETHNICITY, THE DRAGONFLY SEA

Introduction

In 2005, at the 600th anniversary of Zheng He's (郑和) voyages, a 19-year-old girl named Mwamaka Sharifu from Lamu, an island off the Kenyan coast, who is believed to be the offspring of sailors of Zheng He's fleet was awarded a scholarship to study in China, "where [she believes that her] ancestors live"¹. This news attracted media attention both in and outside China, even though the story is not exactly new. In 1994 Louise Levathes, an American journalist and author, suggested in her book *When China Ruled the Sea* that some Washanga people living off the Kenyan coast are descendants of shipwrecked Chinese sailors of Zheng He's fleet (Levathes, 1994: 198–203). Again in 1999, the *New York Times* journalist Nicholas D. Kristof conducted a trip following Zheng He's steps across China, India and Kenya and reported that some Famao men in the village of Siyu, who have "light skin and narrow eyes", claim to be "descended from Chinese and others" (Kristof, 1999). This story was also picked up by the former *People's Daily* journalist Li

1 "Feature: Kenyan girl with Chinese blood steals limelight". 2005-07-07. <http://ke.china-embassy.org/eng/sbgx/t202741.htm> accessed on 11.12.2019.

Xinfeng (李新烽), who went to Siyu in 2002 and collected local stories to validate this historical connection between Africa and China². Later that year, a female journalist from *Wuhan Evening Post* (武汉晚报), Fan Chungge (范春歌) arrived at Pate after her two-year journey on the route of Zheng He and reported her findings to the Chinese embassy in Nairobi, who sent two diplomats to Lamu to investigate the case at the end of 2002 (Lin, 2005). According to Sharifu, her mother's hair was cut by some Chinese experts for DNA testing in 2002 (China Daily, 2005), while a local news report in Chinese says that Sharifu was informed by the Malindi mayor that her mother had taken a DNA test commissioned by a British research group and claims that Sharifu is willing to take another test to prove her ancestry if required (Nanjing Morning Post, 2005). From 1994 to the beginning of 21st century, the story of African descendants of Zheng He's fleet spills out of coastal Kenya and enters the international and Chinese spotlight. Despite temporal, linguistic and positional differences in all these reports and narratives, biological traits lay a fundamental basis for Sharifu's story, from Levathes and Kristof's accounts of physical similarity to Chinese journalists' coverage of the DNA test. The concept of being Chinese here does not stay on a national or cultural level or is limited to citizenship but has been extended into ethnicity and biology associated with ancestry lineage.

Mwamaka Sharifu's story does not fade after 2005 or stay within the media sphere only; instead it continues its afterlife in fictional narratives. The novel *The Dragonfly Sea*, which was published in 2019 by Alfred A. Knopf, recounts a similar travel of the protagonist Ayaana from Kenya to China as a descendant of Zheng He's fleet. Its author, the Kenyan writer Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, admits that the novel "is inspired by this historical incident" (Owuor, 2019: Author's Note), but she also emphasizes the fictionality and alteration of historical events (Ibid). This declaration admits the creative and aesthetic aspect of fictional writing and maintains its distance from the real world but also confirms the novel's engagements with the real world as an intervention into dominant historiographical writings. The novel was partly drafted in Australia (Owuor, 2014) and its first debut in New York implied the targeted audience and market of this book.

The novel is a Bildungsroman (coming of age novel) with an emphasis on the Indian Ocean connections and interactions. It is narrated through both a universal and limited Third-Person Point of View, which allows for the possibility of authorial intervention and heterogenization of perspectives. The protagonist Ayaana is raised by her mother Munira as a single parent. Without her own father around, she takes Muhidin as her father. After a DNA test she is chosen as the descendent of Zheng He's fleet to go to China to study. She boards a cargo ship captained by Lai Jin, starts learning Mandarin with teacher Ruolan and develops a relationship with Lai Jin. In China, Ayaana decides to study nautical science in Xiamen and meets Koray, a classmate from Turkey. Later Ayaana follows

2 Li is said to be the first Chinese journalist to report on Mwamaka Sharifu (details can be found at "李新烽非洲踏寻郑和路", Li Xinfeng traces the route of Zheng He in Africa), December, 2006. 人民网, in Chinese, accessed on 11.06.2020 <http://chinese.people.com.cn/BIG5/42476/74202/index.html>). His reportages were later collected and published in 2013 as the book titled "Tracing Zheng He in Africa" (非洲踏寻郑和路, translated by the author).

Koray to Istanbul and finds out that Koray's family is in the human trafficking business, smuggling people to Europe. With help from the Chinese embassy, Ayaana escapes and returns to China. Later she reconnects with Lai Jin and decides to quit her studies and return to Pate on receiving news that Muhidin is missing. As Owuor indicates, she attempts to make sense of "a time of transition and flux in the Indian Ocean for all sorts of geopolitical and historical reasons, including and especially the twin rise of China and its influences and an extremist version of Islam" (Owuor, 2014: 94–95). This contextualization is very interesting as it addresses both the global narratives towards Islam and the Middle East after 9/11 and the discourse of a rising China since the beginning of this century. The Indian Ocean for Owuor is not only a space or platform of geopolitics but also a positionality to scrutinize both historical and current dynamics within the region, with multiple temporalities and identities – which is beyond the national frame.

This paper will not delve into the debate of whether or not Zheng He is represented truthfully to history, but it will focus on how Zheng He is told and retold in the novel. *The Dragonfly Sea* is selected as text not due to its intimacy with reality but to its focus on local perspective and space and its exposure of the intertwined and multilayered interplay of nationalism, localism and internationalism. This paper aims to show how the narrative of Zheng He is adopted and utilized to create, blur or resist boundaries of nation and race and how these narratives function in relation to the dominant discourses surrounding the rise of China. It will first review the history of Zheng He used in Chinese diplomacy and by Chinese overseas with the help of Balibar's concept of fictive ethnicity and Ruth Simbao's "push back". The construction and negotiation of the myth of Zheng He and the ambiguity and nuances within interactions between Kenya and China on national, regional and individual levels will be explored to generate a literary perspective into the engagements of Africa-China.

Zheng He, Chinese overseas and visceral solidarity

Between 1405 and 1433, seven seafaring voyages were carried out from China to the Indian Ocean under the command of fleet captain Zheng He (郑和). It is believed that his fleets reached the shores of eastern Africa from his fourth voyage onwards (Li, 2012: 41–42), including places in Kenya and present-day Somalia. However, due to the loss and scarcity of records and documents, the intentions, reasons and agendas of these voyages in the 15th century remain unknown and contested (Wyatt, 2010: 95). Whether these voyages were a search for the missing emperor Jianwen, whose throne was usurped by emperor Yongle, or simply an exhibition of power and wealth to extend the tributary system and the Ming's world view, leaves room for its reuse, rewriting and reinterpretation to advance the agenda of the present both within and outside China (Ptak, 2007). The debate as to whether Zheng He's voyages in the 15th century were maritime imperialism (Finlay, 1991: 5) and "proto-colonialism" (Wade, 2005: 51) or a peaceful expansion of China (Tan, 2005) is ongoing. These debates are not limited to academic discussions about history but have been extended to political and even ideological discourses surrounding China in the present.

In China, Zheng He has been a literary and political trope through centuries (Ptak, 2007).

More recently, Liang Qichao (梁启超) has published on Zheng He to “awaken his readers and to strengthen their confidence in China’s future” (Ptak, 2007: 37). After the establishment of the PRC, he is often cited in the official narrative to symbolize the unaggressive economic or political expansion of China’s influence and to emphasize its long-term friendship on an equal basis with other nations, especially in Asia and Africa (Xi, 2013, 2017). As Strauss notices, “virtually all the contemporary official and semi-official discourse on China’s involvement with Africa stresses history” (Strauss, 2009: 780). The favorable projection of Zheng He both builds up national pride within China and asserts its peaceful rise and non-aggressive foreign relations abroad. During the visit of premier Zhou Enlai in Dar es Salaam in June 1965, his speech used Zheng He as historical proof for China’s interaction with Africa “to trade and interact with the African people as equals” (Monson, 2009: 6), stressing its different historical lineage and political stance from the West and the Soviet Union. After the Chinese economic reform in the 1980s, Zheng He signified a non-aggressive historical link between China and countries along the Indian Ocean in terms of economics and politics, especially towards the Islamic world – from the policies of Deng Xiaoping to the state visit of Jiang Zemin (Ptak, 2007: 40). Zheng He is taken as a historical basis for Afro-Asian solidarity in anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism after the Bandung conference (1955) in the Cold War context.

Not coincidentally, despite changes in China’s agenda and priorities in its foreign policies and diplomacy after the Cold War, the myth of Zheng He persists in the official rhetoric. In 2005, a grand ceremony marking the 600th anniversary of Zheng He’s voyages took place at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing³. One year later, the 3rd Summit of the Forum of China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was attended by 48 African countries, also in Beijing. In 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), announced by Xi Jinping in Indonesia, references Zheng He’s voyages again, but it is not taken symbolically as a token of respect for independence and equality as in Zhou’s era; instead, it is revived physically through the sea route to call for economic interactions and cooperation among regions along the Indian Ocean. Later in 2017, Xi’s speech at the Belt and Road Forum in Beijing defined Zheng He as a “friendly emissary”, who has “built a bridge for peace and East-West cooperation”⁴. This brings in the old comparison of a peacefully rising China and “conquerors with warships, guns or swords”⁵ but Xi’s phrasing at the same time calls for a cooperation between “the East” and “the West”, a division which entails ambiguous geographical, ideological and discursive implications. Zheng He, in this official rhetoric, has become a myth, constructed through selective remembering and forgetting based on political and economic intentions and force. It serves the formation of an “imagined community” while being told as a story “to exhibit both a foundational as well as a contra-present dynamic” (Erll, 2016: 34).

3 “Zheng He Anniversary Highlights Peaceful Growth”. China Daily, July 12, 2005. <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2005/Jul/134724.htm> accessed on 10.12.2019.

4 “President Xi proclaims Silk Road spirit”. Source: Xinhua | 2017-05-14. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136281622.htm accessed on 11.12.2019.

5 Ibid

Meanwhile, the constant use of the myth of Zheng He by the PRC is also part of the construction of itself as the legitimate inheritor of Zheng He's historical legacy, the representative of Chinese culture and the spokesperson of Chinese ethnicity both internally and externally. This is to include overseas Chinese and Chinese overseas into China's development of a diplomacy abroad. Chinese overseas (海外华人), in contrast to overseas Chinese (华侨), often refers to "everyone of Chinese descent living outside Greater China" (Wang, 1993: 927) with a foreign passport but ethnically Chinese. In this sense, the concept of Chinese overseas highlights both the foreign citizenship and Chinese ethnicity. During the Mao era, with the cancellation of the double nationality policy as established by the Nationalist party (国民党) after the Bandung conference, the new PRC did not have the intention or ability to influence Chinese overseas (Suryadinata, 2017: 26). However, with its economic rise and the increasing flow of new migrants (新移民) abroad, China is now exerting more energy "to use the Chinese overseas as social, political, and economic capital [...and to see] the Chinese overseas are crucial for the realization of the 'China Dream'" (Suryadinata, 2017: 1). The Chinese government tries to include, mobilize and even utilize the Chinese diaspora or overseas Chinese to advance economic development or the political agenda within China (Wade, 2019: 189). These interactions are not only aided culturally by the Confucius Institute and the Center for Language Education and Cooperation (教育部中外语言交流合作中心, the original name is "Hanban") or carried out through the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council (OCAO, 国务院侨务办公室), but are also loosely or closely connected with various organizations or associations formed by Chinese migrants, such as the Chinese Chamber of Commerce in certain nations and regions, and networks built abroad through participants' regional vicinity in China.

It is important to discuss these concepts here because Mwanaka Sharifu, as the selected descendant of Zheng He's sailors, is included into the category of Chinese overseas. Her voyage to China is carried out by or organized through national institutions, but it also goes beyond international relations or diplomacy in the national frame and enters the realm of familial relations based on ethnic affinity in relation to the nation as a "metaphoric kin group" (Eriksen, 2004: 59). The DNA test seems to be a scientific proof of bloodline, but it is not really scientifically sound or plausible if the heterogeneity and ambiguity of Chinese DNA is considered and if the existence of a "pure" Chinese race is contested. The history of Zheng He and the DNA test jointly form Sharifu's story and the myth of Chineseness. It echoes with Etienne Balibar's concept of "fictive ethnicity", which refers to "the community instituted by the nation-state" (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991: 96) "articulated to the modern idea of race" (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991: 100). The concept of Chinese overseas partly differs from this though, since it integrates the national and racial ideas but entails a more transnational dimension. This paper will not delve into the terrain of race and ethnicity in China or the construction of fictive ethnicity of Chineseness; instead, it focuses more on how these concepts are used and transformed in transnational interactions, especially in Africa-China encounters and how they are discussed and debated in literary narratives.

Meanwhile, the efforts to trace and validate the ethnic link between East Africa and Chi-

na can be said to be another form of “visceral solidarity” from the Cold War era into the present. “Visceral solidarity” is a term mentioned by Stuart Schram and quoted by Frank Dikötter to argue that in Mao’s China “the race problem had become a class problem” (Dikötter, 1992: 192). It emphasizes the solidarity built among racialized people who were “long oppressed and humiliated by the white power of Europe and America” (Schram, cited in Dikötter, 1992: 192). In the Chinese context this took shape especially after Mao’s statement to call for support of the struggles against racial discrimination in the United States in 1963 (Mao, 1966). On the one hand, China’s own identification with the western concept “yellow race” (Keevak, 2011) motivates China to self-identify as People of Color and on the other hand, this solidarity is formed out of an interpretation of shared history among the “Third World”, the need of united struggles against imperialism and colonialism, and China’s diplomatic intention to break isolation after its split with the Soviet Union and the containment of the U.S. All this runs parallel with the use of the history of Zheng He, turning to Africa and Asia under the friendship discourse. Lefkowitz also cited the concept of visceral solidarity from Dikötter to examine the visualization of Africans in Chinese posters during the Cultural Revolution (Lefkowitz, 2017: 33). Instead of comparing representations of Africans with the Han majority, Lefkowitz parallels them with ethnic minority communities in China, which “maintain[s] a sense of difference, but not exclusion, between the Han majority and its endogenous and exogenous others” (Lefkowitz, 2017: 33). This shifting of reference point actually acknowledges the inner differences and diversity within China and links the concept of visceral solidarity with fictive ethnicity as in the idea of the Chinese nation and Chinese bloodline, especially considering the fact that Zheng He as well as Sharifu were/are Muslims. To use a DNA testing to prove Sharifu’s ancestry differs from the visceral solidarity based on skin color in the Cold War, but the intention to prove the historical link and to promote friendship remains unchanged.

In contrast to the brother-like rhetoric, narratives positioning China as the neo-colonizer or new empire in Africa are also circulate widely, but “small stories” or nuances of Africa-China interactions are often out of sight (Simbao, 2019; Thornber, 2016). Cheng proposes a “mutual gaze” within Chinese-African encounters to address ambivalent and multi-layered experiences and representations (Cheng, 2019). Simbao directly terms the interventions of visual art on these issues as a “‘push back’ against generic stereotypes, and [a] de-link from the northern undercurrents of loud ‘China-Africa’ narratives” (Simbao, 2019). Simbao roughly divides these “pushing against” interventions into three categories: “1) utilizing one loud narrative (such as the West’s anti-China rhetoric) to push against another (such as the simplistic ‘win-win’ rhetoric of many African governments), 2) exploring potential forms of solidarity or resonance and 3) drawing from personal experience to inform in-depth, small narratives” (Simbao, 2019: 228). What Simbao does not address is the reason and motivation for using one specific loud narrative against the other and the looming risks of this confrontation. In other words, what is the affective and political force behind each narrative that is taken as possible “push back”? Are they really effective or possible as de-links or de-stereotypes? How do these strategies of “push back” function in intersecting the grand narrative and small stories? Through the

following textual analysis of *The Dragonfly Sea*, this paper will explore the complexity and ambiguity exhibited through the literary “push back” and the polemics and politics of representation.

Rewriting history from the local

The novel begins with Ayaana’s childhood in 1992 in Pate, an island in the Lamu archipelago. As a child growing up with a single mom Munira, Ayaana is always looking for a father-like figure and finally decides on Muhidin, a well-traveled fisherman and boat builder along the Indian ocean, despite her mother’s second marriage with Ziriyaab Raamis, the son of Muhidin, who just came back to Pate from Turkey. Owuor spends some time narrating Muhidin and Ziriyaab’s experiences to map out the interactions and connections among regions along the Indian Ocean. The 1998 United States Embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam are also alluded to through the traveling of an Egyptian from Pate to Nairobi. In 2004, Ziriyaab is kidnapped by terrorists and leaves behind a huge debts that become Munira’s responsibility. On the one hand, all this reveals the position of Pate in the Indian Ocean and its diverse and dynamic flow of people, goods and cultures; on the other hand, all the story lines jointly construct a literary and geographical universe in the Indian Ocean instead of a nation-state, emphasizing Pate’s perspective as a borderland. All together this sets the tone and context for the appearance of China on Pate and also determines the discussion being situated within the frame of the Indian Ocean. The first Chinese person Ayaana meets is Mzee Kitwana Kipfit (“Kid wants to keep fit”), a name given by the locals, jokingly referring to his physical features and his habit of jogging in the morning. In their accidental encounter, Ayaana reminds Kipfit of “a child of another China” (Owuor, 2019: 66), implying both temporal and ethnic heterogeneity of China. Later Kipfit writes a letter entitled “Belt and Road, Culture and Opportunity” to “a high-level party man” in China with the hope “to secure a heritage of rightful belonging” (Owuor, 2019: 113). Even though Kipfit has abandoned his Chinese name and settled down in Pate, as a Chinese person overseas he is still culturally and historically connected to China. After describing the letter and Kipfit’s background, the novel moves directly to the abduction of Ziriyaab by the terrorists (Owuor, 2019: 118). This temporal and spatial arrangement of the two events, one directly after another, echoes the parallel development of a rising global terrorism and a global China at the beginning of 21st century. In the meantime, the presence of Kipfit and his arrival, motivated by Zheng He, in Pate imply that China is not new in Pate and that a continuum from Zheng He to the 20th Century and to the BRI in the present exists. However, throughout the novel, the voice of Kipfit is seldomly heard directly, even though he is said to speak Kipate (Owuor, 2019: 152), a variety of Swahili spoken in Pate. Kipfit is either narrated through the authorial narrator of his inner thoughts and background or through the narration of Ayaana as a benign but incommunicable person. He is both vocal and silent: vocal in his advancement of reviving Zheng He’s history in Pate while silent and without his own voice in his interactions with locals. This reveals an epistemological and structural fracture that exists with no quality communication between agencies directly involved in the revival of Zheng He, whose historical legacy is claimed only on the side of China. The voice and history of Pate are

silenced while voices of Chinese individuals are also seldomly represented.

Not long after, Chinese officials visit Pate with Kipfit as the local guide. Detailing and narrating the visit from a local perspective is a rewriting of the news reports, which can be seen as a “push back” to the dominant friendship narrative. The Chinese officials are referred to as “they”, a faceless group linguistically and ontologically distant and separate from a hidden but present “we”. Their actions are described as “they were listened to”, “they spoke”, “they shared” and “they laughed” (Owuor, 2019: 152) with no details on the side of the participants from Pate. A power imbalance exists here, with China in the dominant and steering position and Pate as the recipient. In this context, Zheng He becomes a symbol of the empire. “One of the retired Pate civil servants” asked rhetorical questions about Zheng He: “was he not a military man whose role was to grow an empire? Was he not in our waters for the purpose of extracting tribute? Did he not threaten our people? Were not our people forced to deliver what he demanded, or risk war” (Owuor, 2019: 153). This is a blatant “push back” by using the narrative of China as an empire to refute the friendship discourse. Taken as a token intrusion, exploitation and coercion, Zheng He’s voyages are aligned with colonial history and Pate is positioned as the victim, only passively involved. Linking Zheng He with colonial history brings up the emotional and relatively fresh memories of anti-colonial resistance and its success. Yet these questions are brought up by a retiree instead of a “local member of Parliament, the district administrator, the tall, attenuated, and eternally lugubrious police inspector, and select imams and sheikhs” (Owuor, 2019: 152). In this sense, Pate is not fully passive, but its active agency both on the national and local level does not represent the “we” as the ordinary in Pate.

After a DNA test, Ayaana is selected as a descendant of Zheng He’s fleet. Then “two men and a woman from China, and a man from Nairobi – a Ministry of Foreign Affairs person who had never before ventured closer than Mtito Andei” (Owuor, 2019: 155) visit Munira in Pate to gain her permission to send Ayaana to China. During their conversation, Chinese officials emphasize that “because of the water, we are one destiny. The string of destiny binds our feet. [...] China is in your blood. [...]. Yet fate has chosen this moment to invite us... and you... into a duty to history” (Owuor, 2019: 155-156). Referred to as fate and destiny, the myth of Zheng He serves here not simply as a cultural resurrection of the past but as a formative and powerful concept to compel the individual into a collective plan and to construct an imagined community beyond the nation-state through ethnicity. In the end, Munira agrees to this trip because of the financial pressure of Ziriya’s debt. The power asymmetry within China-Africa interactions and the unfriendliness embedded in the narrative are unveiled. For example, the depiction of Munira’s situation here refutes an overly simplistic friendship rhetoric by exposing the structural inequality between nation and individual, between nation and nation, between nation and region and between nation and the global system.

In the conversation with the Chinese officials, Munira feeling confused and perplexed tries to seek help and support from a Nairobi man in Swahili, but the Kenyan government official only replies in Swahili: “take what they offer. It is free” (Owuor, 2019: 156). This Swahili exchange is an attempt of Munira to exclude the Chinese officials from the

conversation and to call for allyship through the national frame in the face of China, but the Nairobi official's reply emphasizes the offer being free, inserting a neo-liberal evaluation into the decision about Ayaana's fate. A discrepancy in interests exists here between the periphery and the national center and between the nation and individual. Through Munira, the narrative expresses disappointment in the central government's failure to represent local voices and condemns its prioritization of economic gains without considerations of other factors.

As a work of fiction the novel provides a space for reflection on connections along the Indian Ocean. Situating China's rise with other events challenges the exceptionality of Zheng He's voyages and offers a broader historical perspective to look at the current Kenya-China relations. By exposing the impacts of China's return to Pate onto individuals, the novel pushes against the friendly image of Zheng He promoted by the Chinese state to exhibit and exert the agency of the locals in the borderland Pate, which is often not "loud" in both national and international politics. Meanwhile, the efforts of Chinese overseas like Kipfit to include Ayaana as a Chinese overseas reinforce the idea of the existence of a Chinese ethnicity. It also emphasizes the Chinese state's intention to deploy both historical and cultural resources for the deepening of mutual understanding and diplomatic and economic relations – although often with controversies.

Refuting nation through nationality

Ayaana is chosen to go to China for the purpose of the DNA test, which "confirmed some of the intimate 'lines' of connection that linked Pate to China" (Owuor, 2019: 154). This biological determinism shows an ambivalent affinity between technology and ideology, using science to back a political agenda. China or Chinese-ness as a cultural and ethnic construct is not interrogated; instead it resurfaces through a fundamental blood lineage and biological features assisted by modern technology. According to Balibar, fictive ethnicity implies an imagined kinship over class, racial, cultural differences and structural inequality within the nation. The DNA test serves as a modern "scientific" version of the "visceral solidarity" through kinship. In contrast to the modernization that pushes the economic connection beyond family and blood bonds, China instead brings the concept of family and kinship to the economic and political expansion. An imaginary kinship substitutes other forms of imagined community. Through a DNA test, Ayaana is taken as a Chinese overseas and the history of Zheng He and the construction of a Chinese race are materialized and validated.

When the female Chinese official says that "China is in your blood", Munira answers that "on this island all the world's blood flows" (Owuor, 2019: 156), refusing the rigidity and categorization of people along blood lines and acknowledging the diversity, heterogeneity and fluidity of identification. Shortly after the visit of the Chinese official in Pate, Munira recalls her being pregnant with Ayaana as an inner monologue through a third person point of view (Owuor, 2019: 160-162). In factuality, a man from Singapore is Ayaana's biological father, a secret kept by Munira from Ayaana. The direct link between Ayaana and Zheng He's fleet is thus deconstructed as well as the direct correlation between nationality and biological features. The nationality of the father as a Singaporean correlates

with the rise of the “four Asian dragons” before the PRC and it shifts the historical frame from 600 years ago to more recent interactions, which reaffirms the diversity and dynamics of the borderland Pate in its interactions with the Indian Ocean. In this sense, the origin of Ayaana’s biological father is not only a genetic and biological denial of Zheng He’s heritage but also a temporal rebuttal of the global historical link in the 15th century as implied through the Zheng He myth.

However, the correlation between Chinese ethnicity and the DNA test is not refuted. The biological father’s nationality simply restates the logic between biological affinity and geographical proximity. Ayaana’s identity as a Chinese overseas, as the DNA result suggests, has not changed. The existence of “China blood”, or what it means to be a descendent of China, is not challenged and neither is the DNA test; instead, only another explanation through nationality is offered, in the same vein as biological determinism. Because Singapore is geographically closer to China, it seems that there is no need to further explain the blood lineage of Chinese in Ayaana. The distinction between Ayaana and China is drawn mainly through the differences in nationality, repeating the racial and ethnic construction between national borders. In this sense, the DNA test is left uncontested and it still confirms the genetic link of Ayaana with China, just not as the direct descendant of Zheng He’s fleet as proposed by the Chinese government. Nationality is prioritized as a position and the route to resist the Zheng He myth or the biological solidarity with China. Liaison between nation and race is once again reinforced.

In addition to Ayaana, another Chinese individual in Kenya also faces the entanglements of race and nation: Lai Jin, a Chinese national whose mother is half Uighur and half Japanese and who becomes close to Ayaana during her voyage to China. After a series of events, he decides to follow Ayaana back to Pate after she leaves her studies in Xiamen. When Lai Jin meets Ayaana again in Pate, Ayaana complains that “on my plane home... there were more of you than there were of us on board. China is our typhoon.” (Owuor, 2019: 463). The comparison of China to a typhoon repeats the trope of “China threat” (Broomfield, 2003; Roy, 1996; Storey & Yee, 2002). In the face of these comments, Lai Jin replies: “I’m not ‘China’. I am Lai Jin. A man. I am here. My purpose is to find you. A man. He has come to find Haiyan. A man, not ‘China’” (Ibid). Lai Jin tries to declare and accentuate his humanity and individuality beyond nationality three times and to disassociate himself from “China” to prove his sincerity and affection towards Ayaana. This declaration, on the one hand, sounds the alarm against the rigid identity marker categorized by nationality, and on the other hand, refutes Ayaana’s conception of Chinese nationals as the representation of the nation. In Ayaana’s complaint, the heterogeneity of China is brushed aside, and the humane dimension of individual Chinese seems to vanish when China is mentioned. “China” is not simply a nation here but also becomes an entity with an internal unity as a superpower, a race and a global capital. It is undeniable that Ayaana’s comments are intended to question the expansion of China, both in migration and capitalism, but these comments are dangerous in its racialization of the nation, assuming that China as a nation-state is one with all its capital flow and mobile citizens. With the conversation going deeper, Lai Jin tells Ayaana, “In some places... where the roads are built by our China’ – a shine in his eyes – ‘in the bus I have lied; I said I am

from Japan. We design good roads” (Ibid). Passing, as Ginsberg describes, is as an act of “an individual [who] crossed or passed through a racial line or boundary – indeed trespassed – to assume a new identity, escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other” (Ginsberg, 1996: 3). Lai Jin’s passing is across both national and racial boundaries, which is out of embarrassment, disappointment and contempt of China with “his poke in the eye of a hateful stepmother” (Owuor, 2019: 463). All these mixed emotions, which initiate his passing, are mainly expressed out of criticism and the conception that China builds bad roads while Japan builds good ones. This binary division of good and bad almost entirely repeats the discourse of the West and the rest, among which Japan, as part of the West, is more developed, desired and modern, even more moral while its societies and projects are set as the standard to assess others (Hall, 1992: 275). In contrast to Japan, China, due to its ideology and history, is often categorized as the colored rest. During the apartheid in South Africa, Japanese were classified as honorary white while Chinese as non-white (Park, 2008: 128). The physical and cultural affinity between China and Japan also makes his passing possible, especially given the entangled history of Japan’s colonization of Taiwan and occupation of China in World War II. For Lai Jin, passing as Japanese is not out of a desire to shun oppression but to escape criticism and the demand to explain China’s poor-quality projects, a hierarchy that he has internalized. This confirms the differences or even “distance” in development level between China and the West. Chinese projects are not as good as those built by Japan or the West, despite the paradoxical fact that the latter is often taken as the neo-colonizer or new imperialist. Lai Jin’s passing also shows that criticism towards Chinese projects is often directed at him as a Chinese national, who is racialized and generalized as the nation-state China. The hidden logic is actually that due to the Chinese development model of state capitalism, the Chinese individual is taken as an accomplice of the state and often subsumed under the category of Chinese national. To pass as a Japanese avoids the necessity of self-explanation and the difficulty of whether and how one culturally and racially distances oneself as an individual from all the discourses surrounding China. This is the privilege or benefit of passing as Japanese, a people recognized as aligned with the West, so they do not need to explain themselves. Lai Jin’s passing implies indeed a protest to the Chinese-built infrastructure in Kenya, but it also criticizes the rigidity and reductive power of identity categories based on nation and their association with physical appearance formed by the discourse of the West and the rest.

(Re)interpreting culture

After the DNA test and all the preparations, Ayaana boards the ship of Captain Lai Jin as “the descendant” in the company of her Chinese teacher Shu Ruolan, unaware of and indifferent to the identity of her biological father. This voyage echoes that of Zheng He and can be seen as a return and rewriting of Zheng He into the present. During her voyage to China, Ayaana begins to learn Mandarin. In the Mandarin class, teacher Ruolan explains “Africa” (非洲, feizhou) and “China” (中国, zhongguo) as “Fei: nothing, wrong, lacking, ugly, not, and Zhou: being, state, country. Put together: Not Existing. [...] ‘China!’

she exclaimed refers to ‘Middle Kingdom. True. Beautiful.’” (Owuor, 2019: 197). These translations from the Chinese characters confirm China as a Sino-centric empire with a racist culture through linguistic formation. Ruolan’s statement reinstitutes the hierarchy and colonial discourses, internalizing the hegemony and positioning China as the center. This is in stark contrast to the friendship discourse, exposing China’s hypocrisy and cover-up of entrenched racism. Even though Ayaana is recognized as the descendant of Zheng He, her “foreignness” is still clearly marked, and her origin is still linguistically and culturally undermined, discriminated and excluded.

However, Ruolan’s explanation of “非洲” (feizhou, Africa) and “中国” (zhongguo, China) ignores the etymology of these terms and assumes a cultural continuity through language. Both in the *Great Universal Geographic Map* (坤輿万国全图), composed by the Italian missionary Matteo Ricci (利玛竇) in China in 1602 (Ricci, 1602) Italy, in 1552. In 1571, he entered the Society of Jesus and began his novitiate at the College of Rome, where he studied theology and philosophy as well as mathematics, cosmology, and astronomy. In 1577, Ricci asked to be sent as a missionary to Asia. He arrived in Portuguese Goa (present-day India, and in the *Illustrated Treatise on the Maritime Kingdoms* (海国图志), published shortly after the Opium War in 1842 (Wei, 1842), Africa was called “利未亚洲” (Liweiyazhou, similar with the pronunciation of Libya). In Xu Jiyu’s *Brief records of the world* (瀛寰志略) published in 1849, Africa was named as 阿非利加 (afeilijia)⁶. The latter translation is closer to the English pronunciation of Africa and the book itself was written by Xu with the help of American missionaries and British consuls in Fuzhou, when China was forced to open after the Nanjing Treaty. This translation is further shortened as 非洲 (feizhou), just like 欧罗巴 (ouluoba, Europe) to 欧洲 (ouzhou) and 亚细亚 (yaxiya, Asia) to 亚洲 (yazhou). Ruolan separates the two characters (字) 非 (fei) and 洲 (zhou) and then combines the explanation of each character to explain the term (词). Her explanation written in Chinese characters and Chinese pinyin seem to imply a metonymic relationship between language and culture and her English explanation is in fact a translation assuming an equation of Chinese language and English. Not only does this equation assume a fictional equal transference, but also the translation process of concepts and knowledge from the West and Japan into China during the colonial period is ignored here. Just as Naoki Sakai points out: “translation articulates languages so that we may postulate the two unities of the translating and the translated languages as if they were autonomous and closed entities through a certain representation of translation” (Sakai, 2008: 2). Ruolan’s explanation or translation of 非 and 洲 in English here assumes a linguistic isolation and continuity of Chinese language and a “natural” association or equation of one sign to the other, similar with the meaning chain of 夷/yi/barbarian, as explained by Lydia Liu (Liu, 2004). Ruolan, a Chinese teacher and Chinese national, supposedly a professional and insider, with authority on Chinese language and culture, increases the credibility of these claims. Her explanation of 非洲 (feizhou) here repeats the colonial invention of Africa (Mudimbe, 1988), which usurps the colonial knowledge structure to justify her bias.

6 The original text goes as „泰西人分为四土，曰亚细亚、曰欧罗巴、曰阿非利加，此三土相连，在地球东半，别一土曰亚墨利加，在地球西半“。【清】徐继畲。《瀛寰志略》。上海：上海书店出版社 2001,12: 2.

In this sense, the West as the mediation between Africa and China has faded into the background, but is constantly referred to as the standard or norm. China in the present is not only positioned as a colonizer, as was the West in the past, but also becomes an empire of a static, self-centered and unenlightened culture stripped of historical context and complexity, still in the colonial thinking of the postcolonial era. To review the etymology of “非洲” here is not to prove whether or not China is racist, but to point out that if the characterization of Ruolan is a strategy of “push back” using one narrative against the other, then this “push back” resistance is still embedded within a colonial history-oriented structure and rhetoric. It becomes an Orientalist entity with outdated, uncivilized, racist cultural views and customs in its language, and its peculiar culinary customs as chopsticks and “century eggs” (皮蛋) that Ayaana has to “battle with” (Owuor, 2019: 196), another form of cultural imperialism. Only when China is put into the position of colonizer or empire, as an old empire with cultural backwardness and imbedded racism, sharing similarities with the colonial discourse and superiority, can it be rightfully resisted. Both Ruolan and Ayaana adopt the colonial emotional and knowledge rhetoric to justify their domination and resistance, which in fact repeats the colonial structure again.

Conclusion

At the end of the novel, Lai Jin stays with Ayaana in Pate and acquires a local name. This ending gives hope to cross cultural, racial, national and historical borders instituted through identity categories and international geopolitics for a shared future. The novel *The Dragonfly Sea* is a kind of “push back” in Simbao’s term to the Chinese official discourse of constructing a “fictive ethnicity” between Kenya and China through Zheng He. It challenges and reverses the dominant discourses to allow the individuals’ perspective from Pate and the Indian Ocean to review the global flow of capital and migration. This resistance or “push back” takes Chinese engagements in Africa not as something new but with historical and temporal parallels. Situating the story within the Indian Ocean is also an effort of going beyond the national frame and the limitation of “Africa-China”. Through a nuanced and individual perspective, the contradictions and dynamics behind a friendly advancing course of China’s engagements in Pate and Kenya is revealed. Indeed, the risk of falling back into the racial and national frame still looms, as narratives similar to “China threat” or mixed with an Orientalist flavor characteristic of perspectives in the West, are often part of the strategy of “push back”. As Mbembe points out, “race and racism are certainly linked to antagonisms based on the economic structure of society. But it is not true that the transformation of the structure leads ineluctably to the disappearance of racism” (Mbembe, 2017: 37). Despite the socialist transformation of the PRC in 1949 or its rise globally in the 21st century, which caused economic and political transformations, the colonial structure and the discourses of race and racialization still persist globally (Da Silva, 2007). In the meantime, as Yan and Sautman observe, the Chinese in Africa generally “lack political power, determinative influence, or cultural hegemony” (Sautman & Yan, 2016: 2151) and racialization can serve as an agency for African states to negotiate or pressure on certain topics (Sautman, 2015). In this sense, China is both part and participant of the racial structure, repeating and being repeated in

the circulation of racial discourse or stereotypes around the globe. If the resistance and criticism towards China are located in a similar rhetoric, the risk of reiterating the current structural hierarchies and power relations looms, which might reduce the effects of de-link and reflections. Positioning China as a colonial power and comparing its recent expansion with British colonization ushers in the spirit and affection associated with the anti-colonial struggle and ring the alarm of its activities in Africa, but this framing neglects the local agency and risks subsuming individuals under the national or racial category, ignoring related historical nuances and divergences. This limited “push back” is determined partly by the current nation-state system and partly by the epistemological fracture between China and Africa. *The Dragonfly Sea* complicates Simbao’s theorization of “pushing against” the loud China-Africa scripts by intersecting and integrating the grand narrative and “small stories”. When China is positioned in the seat of the colonizer or constructed as an empire for the local narrative, certain related emotions and resources can be revived and mobilized in the face of the almost irresistible global capital expansion, but without changes in the general structure, the future of this resistance remains unclear. The ending of the novel returns to a more humane level of interaction providing a glimpse of hope in terms of mutual understanding. *The Dragonfly Sea* captures the ambiguity and ambivalence in Africa-China interactions and further complicates the discourses surrounding the history and the development of their relations.

References

- Balibar, E. & Wallerstein, I. (1991). *Race, nation, class: Ambiguous identities*. Verso.
- Broomfield, E.V. (2003). Perceptions of Danger: The China threat theory. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 12(35), 265–284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1067056022000054605>.
- Cheng, Y. (2019). History, imperial eyes and the “mutual gaze”: Narratives of African-Chinese encounters in recent literary works. In *Routledge Handbook of African Literature*, 92–109. Routledge.
- China Daily. (2005, July 11). *Is this young Kenyan Chinese descendant?* http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2005-07/11/content_459090.htm.
- Da Silva, D.F. (2007). *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (NED-New edition, Vol. 27). University of Minnesota Press, JSTOR. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cttssrg>.
- Dikötter, F. (1992). *The discourse of race in modern China*. Hong Kong University Press.
- Eriksen, T.H. (2004). Place, kinship and the case for non-ethnic nations. *Nations and Nationalism*, 10(1-2), 49–62. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1354-5078.2004.00154.x>.
- Erl, A. (2016). *Memory in Culture*. Springer.
- Finlay, R. (1991). The Treasure-Ships of Zheng He: Chinese Maritime Imperialism in the Age of Discovery. *The Journal of the Society for the History of Discoveries*, 23(1), 1–12.
- Ginsberg, E.K. (1996). *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. Duke University Press, JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv123x71k>.
- Hall, S. (1992). The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power. In *Formations of Modernity*, 275–331. Polity Press.
- Keevak, M. (2011). *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking*. Princeton University Press. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/30231>.
- Kristof, N.D. (1999, June 6). 1492: The Prequel. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/06/06/magazine/1492-the-prequel.html>.

- Lefkowitz, M. (2017). Revolutionary Friendship: Representing Africa during the Mao Era. In *China-Africa Relations: Building Images through Cultural Co-operation, Media Representation, and Communication*, edited by Kathryn Batchelor and Xiaoling Zhang, 29-50. Routledge, Taylor and Francis. <https://www.routledge.com/China-Africa-Relations-Building-Images-through-Cultural-Co-operation/Batchelor-Zhang/p/book/9780367885793>.
- Levathes, L. (1994). *When China ruled the seas: The treasure fleet of the Dragon Throne, 1405-1433*. Oxford University Press.
- Li, A. (2012). *A History of Overseas Chinese in Africa to 1911*. Diasporic Africa Press.
- Lin, Z. (2005, July 7). 谁发现了非洲“中国人后裔” who discovered African Chinese descendants. CCTV 央视国际. <https://www.cctv.com/science/20050707/101475.shtml>.
- Liu, L.H. (2004). *The Clash of Empires*. Harvard University Press, JSTOR. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvjz8oqt.
- Mao, T.D. (1966). Statement Supporting the American Negroes In Their Just Struggle Against Racial Discrimination by U.S. Imperialism (reprint). *Peking Review*, 9(33), 12-13.
- Mbembe, A. (2017). *Critique of Black Reason* (L. Dubois, Trans.). Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373230>.
- Monson, J. (2009). *Africa's freedom railway how a Chinese development project changed lives and livelihoods in Tanzania*. Indiana University Press.
- Mudimbe, V.Y. (1988). *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. Indiana University Press.
- Nanjing Morning Post. (2005, May 7). 肯尼亚女孩自称郑和水手后裔 愿意接受DNA检测. Sina News 新浪新闻. <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2005-07-05/07347132014.shtml>.
- Owuor, Y.A. (2014). "Dragonfly Monsoon" and Imagined Oceans: In search of Poem-Map of the Swahili Seas [MA thesis]. University of Queensland.
- Owuor, Y.A. (2019). *The dragonfly sea: A novel* (First edition.). Alfred A. Knopf.
- Park, Y.J. (2008). White, Honorary White, or Non-White: Apartheid Era Constructions of Chinese. *Afro-Hispanic Review*, 27(1), 123-138.
- Ptak, R. (2007). Perceptions of Zheng He's Voyages through the Ages. In Suryadinata, L. (ed.), *Chinese Diaspora Since Admiral Zheng He: With Special Reference to Maritime Asia*, 25-50. Chinese Heritage Centre.
- Ricci, M. (1602). *Great Universal Geographic Map*. World Digital Library. <https://www.wdl.org/en/item/4136/>.
- Roy, D. (1996). The "China Threat" Issue: Major Arguments. *Asian Survey*, 36(8), 758-771. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645437>.
- Sakai, N. (2008). *Translation and Subjectivity: On Japan and cultural nationalism*. University of Minnesota Press. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/32483>.
- Sautman, B. (2015). Racialization as Agency in Zambia-China Relations. In Gadzala, A.W. (ed.), *Africa and China: How Africans and Their Governments are Shaping Relations with China*, 127-148. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Sautman, B. & Yan, H. (2016). The discourse of racialization of labour and Chinese enterprises in Africa. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 39(12), 2149-2168. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1139156>.
- Simbao, R. (2019). Pushing against "China-Africa" slowly and with small stories. *Something We Africans Got*, 7, 228-232.
- Storey, I. & Yee, H. (2002). *The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths and Reality*. Routledge.
- Strauss, J.C. (2009). The Past in the Present: Historical and Rhetorical Lineages in China's Relations with Africa. *The China Quarterly*, 199, 777-795. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574100990208>.
- Suryadinata, L. (2017). *The Rise of China and the Chinese Overseas: A Study of Beijing's Changing Policy in Southeast Asia and Beyond*. ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute. <https://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg/publication/2208>.

- Tan, T.S. (2005). Did Zheng He Set Out to Colonize Southeast Asia? In Suryadinata, L. (ed.), *Admiral Zheng He and Southeast Asia*, 42-57. ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/admiral-zheng-he-and-southeast-asia/did-zheng-he-set-out-to-colonize-southeast-asia/93292B708ADED9DoD955FDE30A6ECB19>.
- Thorner, K.L. (2016). Breaking Discipline, Integrating Literature: Africa-China Relationships Reconsidered. *Comparative Literature Studies*, 53(4), 694-721.
- Wade, G. (2005). The Zheng He Voyages: a reassessment. *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 78(1), 288, 37-58.
- Wade, G. (2019). The Uses of ‘Chinese Heritage’: Foreign Policy of the People’s Republic of China in the Contemporary Indo-Pacific World. *Travelling Pasts: The Politics of Cultural Heritage in the Indian Ocean World*, 169-194. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004402713_009.
- Wang, G. (1993). Greater China and the Chinese Overseas. *The China Quarterly*, 136, 926-948.
- Wei, Y. (1842). *Illustrated Introduction to Countries over the Seas* 海国图志.
<https://www.wdl.org/en/item/13515/>.
- Wyatt, D.J. (2010). *The Blacks of Premodern China*. University of Pennsylvania Press. JSTOR.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhnbr>.
- Xi, J. (2013, October 3). *Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament*. ASEAN-China Centre.
http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm.
- Xi, J. (2017, May 14). *Full text of President Xi’s speech at opening of Belt and Road forum*. Xinhua News.
http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm.