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Undetermined Identity: A Diaspora Scholar in China–Africa Studies



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Translated into Chinese from the original English by Samuel Youqin Dong, University of Oxford

The subtitle of this roundtable discussion, “an encounter with another ‘other’”, is strangely compelling to me, who is Asian American, broadly, and Vietnam-born ethnic Chinese American, specifically, engaged in research in South Africa and China. In these contexts, “another ‘other’” is a mirror of the “self” (i.e. other ethnic Chinese) and peoples who have also historically experienced marginalization and occupied a subordinate position in societies (i.e. African people). In relation to “another ‘other’”, my otherness is complicated by my American background. The Americanness is not phenotypically obvious, but subtly signaled through the clothes I wear, the accent (or ability to speak English in a way that non-American listeners regard as being “without an accent”) and certain values I hold, among other things. Needless to say, these identities aid and hinder ethnographic research in myriad ways. Rather than elaborating on dynamics from fieldwork in African and Chinese contexts, I want to think through the struggles and challenges of being Asian American, with scholarly expertise in South Africa and Chinese diaspora studies, working in Chinese academia. My thoughts on the state’s role in facilitating an essentialist view of China–Africa (Africa–China) studies, Eurocentrism in China–Africa studies and ambivalence towards diaspora scholars primarily draw on my position at a Chinese university in southern China since 2013 until now; and through these points, I share some observations of developments in the study of China–Africa relations in China.

The first time I unequivocally recognized that I am an outsider of the China–Africa field in China was in late 2018, two years into my appointment as acting associate professor at the same university where I completed a postdoctoral fellowship. A colleague, who was the director of the African Studies Center in our school (or college) before a tragic death, inquired if I had received an invitation to participate in the inaugural conference of the ‘One Belt One Road’ African Research Alliance, organized by Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (广东“一带一路”非洲研究联盟会议), a university just 15.2 km from our own. Even though he could not obtain our school’s approval to transfer the Center’s director position to me in 2016 (he informed me at that time) due to my foreigner status, he still wanted me to represent the Center. He gave me the contact details of the organizer,

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who said he would send me an invitation, but he never did. I later found out about the conference through an article that a colleague from the Chinese in Africa/Africans in China Research Network (CA/AC), of which I am a co-founder, shared online. I confronted the organizer, who was unapologetic and indicated that the conference was a success. Once I had become aware of this exclusionary mechanism, I saw other events that fit with the pattern.

In my first year of working in China in 2013, there was excitement around China–Africa relations. This was one year after the fifth ministerial conference of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) held in Beijing (see Taylor 2011; Zhang 2011; Li et al. 2012). The Chinese and African governments had reconfirmed their commitment to education cooperation, an initiative that was introduced at the previous ministerial conference (Niu 2014; King 2014). Along with the 20 + 20 cooperation plan that paired 20 Chinese universities with 20 African universities, and the joint research and exchange plan that entrusted scholars and think tanks with the task of strengthening China–Africa relations, research funding, primarily from the National Social Science Foundation, seemed readily available to Chinese scholars. Chinese scholars were traveling to African countries to connect with and learn from diverse groups of scholars in the growing field of China–Africa studies, as well as to conduct research. The person who invited me to apply for a postdoctoral research fellowship was a recipient of one of these grants. I, too, won a first-level research grant from the National Postdoctoral Social Science Foundation that enabled me to conduct research between late 2013 and 2014 among the African women traders in Guangzhou. Unequivocally, the state’s priority was well-funded, which finds resonance with the development and funding of area studies elsewhere (Cumings 1997; Szanton 2002).

Matching the state’s investment in China–Africa research was a sense that the research must be conducted by Chinese scholars to reflect “a Chinese view”. This sensibility was conveyed through conversations with the supervisor of my postdoctoral fellowship. For instance, when I suggested that another African country could be the focus of his project because South Africa has received abundant scholarly attention, he replied that the research had not yet been conducted by Chinese scholars from China. His essentialist view of studying China–Africa relations has taken on new meaning since, as the number of Chinese scholars (including postgraduate students) in the field increases, Africa research centers rise and conferences (domestic and transregional) multiply in China and African countries for Chinese scholars to talk with one another and with some African scholars. This subtle shift from learning from others while pursuing “a Chinese view” towards talking among themselves seemingly parallels China’s increased confidence on the global stage (the progression of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is symbolic) and ongoing state-driven attempts to construct alternative Chinese narratives. The attendees of the China–Africa Think Tank Forum (CATTF) present one exemplary of this shift.

Having been approved by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of China as well as incorporated into FOCAC, CATTF is considered “a high-level platform for China–Africa academic exchanges” and “a bridge for linking up important ideas of Chinese and African elites” (China–Africa Think Tanks 2012). It meets annually, rotating between China and Africa. The first meeting or conference in October 2011 was held in Hangzhou and Jinhua, with representatives of think tanks, governments and enterprises

from China and 27 African countries as well as “countries from other parts of the world” (Declaration of the 1st meeting 2011). The latter’s participation meant that “scholars from other parts of the world with an interest in Sino-African relationship” were also present at the conference (Declaration of the 1st meeting 2011). By the eighth CATTf conference in Beijing in August 2019, the 400 representatives of government officials, think tank scholars, enterprises and media were from China and 51 African countries (Eighth China–Africa Think Tanks 2019). Unlike the first conference, news about the more recent meeting did not mention the presence of other countries or scholars from other parts of the world. The focus had also changed from emphasizing dialogues, exchanges and studies on Africa that would facilitate mutual understanding and present policy recommendations to the building of a closer (or exclusive) China–Africa community with a shared future, cooperation that would steer the BRI towards greater success and the strengthening of the China–Africa joint research and exchange plan put forth by FOCAC, among others (Declaration of the 1st meeting 2011; Eighth China–Africa Think Tanks 2019). An examination of CATTf’s transformation, including the shift from Zhejiang Normal University to the Secretariat of the Chinese Follow-up Committee of FOCAC being the host of the conferences in China, reveals the state’s growing role in shaping the narratives of China–Africa relations.

My knowledge and research on the Chinese communities in South Africa and Africans in China, as well as my diaspora identity, could have been factors for my initial feeling of inclusion in the state’s early aim to broaden and deepen knowledge of Africa. That feeling is fading as Chinese scholarship (think tank reports included) on Africa and China–Africa relations (written in both English and in Chinese) proliferate and the state-driven 20 + 20 cooperation plan develops. Resources, research and researchers seem to be more concentrated and exclusively Chinese with the inclusion of a few African collaborators. One could justify my exclusion on the grounds of language or a lack of interest in migration and identity issues among Chinese scholars. However, the exclusion that I experience seems to be twofold: on the one hand, the essentialist approach to the study of China–Africa relations in China leads to the exclusion of non-Chinese and non-African scholars. As a diaspora scholar, I find myself increasingly viewed as a non-Chinese, other “other” in this dynamic. In the past two years, I have actually been told on several occasions by Chinese colleagues in the field that they could not invite me to participate in their China–Africa events, even when they are at a nearby university, due to the fact that I am a foreigner. On the other hand, the state-driven attempts to construct and manage alternative Chinese narratives – both broadly and specifically – are situated in an ongoing conversation with the West (Dong and Tian 2009; Barr 2012; Corkin 2014; Wilson 2015; Leslie 2016; Batchelor and Zhang 2017; Zhu 2019). As a result, certain foreigners who are perceived to be potentially helpful in building or selling these narratives are selectively included in a way that *de facto* prioritizes whiteness and reproduces existing privileges and hierarchies. The state’s stricter controls over knowledge exchanges with international scholars at Chinese universities further require (justify) Chinese scholars to be strategic (selective) as to who they invite and/or collaborate with. Under such circumstance, African and white-looking EuroAmerican scholars, who are renowned in the China–Africa field or whose research is seemingly sympathetic to China’s position in Africa, would be prime choices. As an Asian American scholar, I, again, find myself not falling within the prime choices.

The aim to address controversial images of Chinese investments (not limited to financial) in Africa, such as neocolonialism or exploitation and racism, further entrenches the West – and in particular the USA – in China–Africa studies. Specifically, the state’s emphasis on telling stories about China well (讲好中国故事) locates China at the center of the narratives, but they are always-already in conversation with the West – even when the latter is often not made explicit (Monson 2014; Xu 2018). Reproducing racial stereotypes of Africans that emanate from the West – intentionally or not – and diverting critiques of anti-Black racism in China as a Western ideological plot, are examples of this conversation. Another example of the West’s continual dominance, that influences academia even more, is the expectation (and even requirement) for Chinese scholars (including postgraduate students) to not simply tell a story about China’s relation with Africa well, but also to make it positive. A positive narrative could entail demonstrating how China is helping Africa to develop and, thus, projecting an image of China as an international cooperator, not to mention China–Africa friendship or brotherhood. A unidimensional idea of China, coupled with ahistorical claims, flattens a complex story that entails dynamic processes. Importantly, the story of “good China”, to borrow the words of Chinese literary scholar, Mao (2009, 267), “creates in many Chinese a strange mixture of nationalistic arrogance and inferiority complex which speaks the language of a deeply internalized Eurocentrism”. This internalized Eurocentrism has a constitutive effect on the people’s paradoxical relations with EuroAmerica as well as the world. As we observe the rise of (ethno-racial) nationalism in China, vividly expressed in Chinese social media, the belief that there is a choice between two extremes – either Sinocentrism and Eurocentrism – is misleading at best (Dirlik 1999).

This leads me to my last and concluding point about the role of diaspora scholars in the China–Africa field, especially ethnic Chinese from the USA. Questions about the kinds of new collaborations and respectful exchanges we could have with African and Chinese scholars have not ceased for me, since an email argument with an African member of the CA/AC. Repeating a memorable view from one of his professors in China, he wrote to me: “you Asian American, African American ... tend to lecture other people a lot!” (Email communication 4 May 2016). Demanding attention to privileges associated with my nationality – and others with similar background – was his way to suggest that I am part of a problem (that includes presenting critical views of China or China–Africa) and, therefore should remain silent on issues between China and Africa. In essence, my academic training and experiences of living in South Africa and China for a number of years do not qualify me to speak because China–Africa relations are internal affairs (the variety found between family members, such as “brothers” that Chinese leaders often emphasize in speeches). That the China–Africa field has no place for “another ‘other’” in his and, by extension, the Chinese professor’s view, reinforces the perpetual foreigner or outsider status that is already too familiar to all Asians in America. Such a sense of territoriality is a privilege that Asian American scholars rarely have, as our empirically informed theoretical studies aim to decenter the West in received knowledge – that could *de facto* reinforce our position as foreigner-within, always-already seen as an immigrant no matter how many generations we have been in the USA (see Lowe 1996; Wu and Song 2004; Cheng 2017). To capture our experiences as migrants, refugees and laborers, among others, in all of their complexity, we not only deliberately cross disciplines, but also build on the works of, and see value in, collaborating with, other Third World¹ scholars in

the Global South and North. Through these, we contribute critical theories, such as Kim's (1999) notion of racial triangulation and Ngai's (2004) excavation of connections between immigration restrictions and new racial categorizations, that are nuanced and uncompromising. Diaspora scholars are already doing the work that Chinese and African scholars aim to achieve in the China–Africa field, especially in the studies of migration, identities and culture as well as their interrelations, so it is worthwhile for them to re-evaluate our position as possible academic allies in spite the magnitude of the state and other forces pushing in the opposite direction.

未定身份: 中非研究的一名离散学者

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翻译: 董尤勤

作为一名身在南非和中国从事学术研究的亚裔美国人,更具体地说是越南出生的美国华裔,本次圆桌讨论的副主题“与另一个‘他者’相遇”对我有一种莫名的吸引力。在这样的语境下,“另一个‘他者’”是“自身”(即其他华裔)以及历史上遭受边缘化且处于社会次要地位的群体(例如非洲人)的一面镜子,但相对于这“另一个‘他者’”而言,我的美国背景导致我的“他者”身份变得更为复杂。这种“美国性”在我身上没有明显的表型特征,而是通过我的衣着和口音(即掌握了非美国人认为是不带口音的英语)以及我所秉持的某些价值观念等其他特质微妙地展现出来。这些身份无疑以不同方式协助或阻碍了我的民族志研究工作。与其细谈在非洲和中国语境下做田野调查的动态,我宁愿思考我作为一个在中国学术界工作、以南非和华侨研究为学术专长的美国亚裔所面临的困难与挑战。我对国家在中非(非中)研究中促进本质论观点、欧洲中心主义和对离散学者的矛盾态度中扮演什么角色的看法,主要借鉴于我从2013年到现在在中国南方一所大学任职的经历,我将透过这些问题分享我对中国国内中非关系研究的一些观察。

第一次清楚认识到我在中国的中非研究领域属于“局外人”是2018年年底,当时我在完成博士后的大学任代理副教授职务已有两年。当时,我院非洲研究中心后不幸逝世的前主任问我是否受邀参加由离我校仅15.2公里的广州外语外贸大学举办的“一带一路”非洲研究联盟成立大会。他曾于2016年告诉我,由于我的外籍身份,他未能征得校方的批准将中心主任的头衔转让给我,但他仍希望我能代表中心出席大会。他给了我会议组织人的联系方式,但我一直未等到组织人承诺要发来的邀请函。后来,我阅读了我参与创立的中非研究网络(*Chinese in Africa/Africans in China Research Network, CA/AC*)的一位同事在网上分享的文章,才得知有关那次大会的信息。于是,我再次联系了该组织的人员,对方毫无歉意,还表示会议举办得很成功。那一刻,我深刻意识到这种排外机制的存在,同时,仿佛也看清了其他符合同一规律的事件。

我来华工作的第一年是2013年,当时人们对中非关系满怀兴奋,中非合作论坛第五届部长级会议一年前在北京召开(见Li et al. 2012; Taylor 2011; Zhang 2011)。中国与非洲各国政府重申了对上一届部长级会议提出的教育合作倡议的承诺(King 2014, Niu 2014)。中非高校“20+20合作计划”将二十所中方大学与二十所非洲大学一一配对展开校际合作,联合研究交流计划又把强化中非关系的重任寄托于学者和智库。与此同时,国家社会科学基金等机构为中国学者提供的研究经费,似乎一应俱全。中国学者纷纷前往非洲各国,与日益发展的中非研究领域里各类学者群体交流学习,进行研究。建议我去申请博士后的人也是这类资助的获得者,庆幸的是,后来我也赢得了中国博士后社会科学基金的一等资助项目。这笔经费,为我2013年年末和2014年研究广州非洲女商人群体创造了条件。显而易见,国家的优先事项得到了充分的资助,这与区域研究在其他地方的发展与资助状况有着异曲同工之妙(Cummings 1997, Szanton 2002)。

但是,有一种观念始终伴随着国家对中非研究的投资。它认为此类研究必须由中国学者进行,以便反映出“中国视角”。我在与博士后导师的谈话中捕捉到了这种感觉,譬如:当我指出

南非已经备受学界关注并提出考虑以非洲其他国家作为研究对象时,他却回答说这项研究还没有被中国学者做过。而随着该领域中国学者数量的增加,各地纷纷创办非洲研究中心,国内和跨区域会议不断在中国和非洲各国举办,中国学者得以与国内的同行和一些非洲学者膝交交流,这种对中非关系研究的本质主义观念也被赋予了新的意义。从向他人学习的同时追求“中国视角”,微妙地转向只和“自己人”交谈,似乎与中国在世界舞台上表现越来越强的自信心(“一带一路”倡议所取得的进展尤其具有象征意义)和国家尝试推动构建的新的中国叙事观都联系在一起。而中非智库论坛的与会者堪称是体现这种转变的典范。

中非智库论坛经中国外交部、商务部批准设立,已纳入中非合作论坛,被认为是“中非学术交流的高端平台”,“为中非精英搭建了联结重要思想的桥梁”(China-Africa Think Tanks 2012)。该论坛每年在中国和非洲轮流举办。第一届会议在杭州和金华举行,参会者是来自中国 and 非洲 27 个国家及“世界上部分其他国家”著名智库的代表、部分企业家和政要(Declaration of the first meeting 2011),这便意味着“世界上其他关心中非关系的学者”也出席了该会议(Declaration of the first meeting 2011)。而当第八届会议于 2019 年 8 月在北京召开时,参与的近 400 名政府官员、智库学者、业界和媒体代表涵盖了中国和 51 个非洲国家(Eighth China-Africa Think Tanks 2019)。与第一届会议不同,有关这次会议的新闻报道并未提及他国和来自世界其他地区的学者。会议的关注点也从原本以增进了解、扩大共识、建言献策为宗旨的对话、交流与探讨,转向构建更加紧密的中非命运共同体,推动完善“一带一路”倡议的合作和为加强中非合作论坛而提出的联合研究交流计划等议题(Declaration of the first meeting 2011, Eighth China-Africa Think Tanks 2019)。此外,中非智库论坛的主持方由中非合作论坛中方后续行动委员会秘书处代替了原来的浙江师范大学。纵观论坛所经历的变化可见,国家正在加大它在塑造有关中非关系的叙事观中所发挥的影响。

或许,是我拥有对南非华人社群和旅华非洲人的知识与研究以及我的海外华人身份,在面对当初国家试图拓宽、深化对非洲的认识时,我产生了一种被包容感。然而,随着中国国内中非关系的中英文学术著作(其中包括智库报告)开始增多、由国家推动的“20+20 合作计划”不断被推进,那种被包容感在日渐淡去。资源和研究似乎变得越来越集中,而除了寥寥几位非洲合作者之外,研究者的行列中仿佛只剩中国人了。诚然,人们可以拿我的语言能力和中国学者对移民与身份问题的不重视,来解释我被排除在外的原因。然而,我所感受到的似乎是一种双重排斥:一方面,在中国国内中非关系研究中盛行的本质论态度,会导致非中国和非非洲的学者遭到排挤。我作为一名离散学者愈发感觉到自己不再被当作华人看待,成了该语境下的“另一个‘他者’”。在过去的两年里,不止一次有中国同事向我表示,他们因我的外籍身份而无法邀请我参加哪怕是在附近大学举行的中非活动。而另一方面,国家推动构建和管理新的中国叙事观的行为,无论广义还是狭义上都处于与西方的持续对话中(见 Barr 2012, Batchelor and Zhang 2017, Corkin 2014, Dong and Tian 2009, Leslie 2016, Wilson 2015, Zhu 2019)。个别被认为有利于构建和宣传这些叙事观的外国人会因此被选择性地纳入其中,而这种纳入方式默认地推崇白人面孔,复制了已有的特权和等级关系。由于国家正在加强对在国内大学与国际学者的知识交流的管控,中国的学者则被迫(或者说有理由)去更有战略性(选择性)地决定应该邀请谁、与谁合作。在这种情形下,那些在中非研究领域里名声显赫或是看似支持中国对非立场的非洲学者和长着白人面孔的欧美学者则是首选。作为一名美国亚裔学者,我便再次被排除在首选行列之外。

直面中国在非洲的投资(不仅是金融方面)和新殖民主义、剥削和种族主义这些极具争议的印象的意图,巩固了西方国家尤其是美国在中非研究领域的参与。准确地说,国家强调讲好中国故事,将中国置于叙事观的中心位置,然而这些叙事向来处于与西方的持续对话,尽管这种对话有时是隐匿的(Monson 2014, Xu 2018)。有意或无意地沿用西方对非洲人的刻板印象、把一切批评中国国内反黑人种族主义的言论视作西方的意识形态阴谋的不屑态度,都是上述对话的例子。指望(甚至要求)中国学者(包括研究生)不仅“讲好”中非关系的故事,还要讲得积极正面的潜规则,也反映了西方持续占据的主导权,在学术领域的影响尤其深远。例如,一个正面叙事观可能意味着论证中国如何协助非洲发展,从而刻画中国的国际合作者形象,其中也不乏中非友谊和兄弟关系的寓意。这种对中国的一元构想和不符合历史事实的说辞则过分简化了一个蕴含着动态过程的复杂故事。引用文学学者毛思慧的话更准确地说,“中国好”的刻画“在不少中国人心中造就了一种将具有民粹主义色彩傲慢态度和自卑情节混杂在一起的奇特心理,反映了一种根深蒂固的欧洲中心主义观”(Mao 2009, 267),而这种内化的欧洲中心主义对人们与欧美和整个外部世界的矛盾关系起到了一种本质性的作用。当我们观察到泛滥于中国社交媒体的种族民族主义兴起时,我们不能忘记:提倡在中国中心主义和欧洲中心主义两个极端二选一的观念,充其量也只能说是误导人的假命题(Dirlik 1999)。

以下便是我对离散学者，尤其是美国华裔在中非研究领域中所扮演的角色的最后一点总结。自从我与中非研究网络的一名非洲学者通过电子邮件发生的一次争论后，关于和非洲与中国学者可能进行的新合作和相互尊重的交流的疑问不断涌现。这位学者居然引用一位中国教授的话在邮件中（参见 2016 年 5 月 4 日的通讯记录）写道：“你们这些美国亚裔、美国非裔 ... 很喜欢教训别人！”他指出这种国籍特权的意图是想告诉我：你也是问题的一部分（其中包括对中国和中非提出批评观点），因此在有关中国和非洲的议题上最好保持沉默。也就是说，我所接受的学术训练和多年旅居南非和中国的经历并没有给我发言的资格，因为中非关系属于内事（就如中国领导常常在演讲中强调的“兄弟关系”一类的家内之事）。在他和他的中国教授的眼里，中非关系领域容不得“另一个‘他者’”，然而这种观点加强了所有在美国的亚裔都再熟悉不过的“永久外国人”和外来者形象。对一片土地拥有强烈的归属感是美国亚裔学者几乎享受不到的特权。我们用实证数据支撑理论研究，旨在打破西方在理论知识中占据的主导地位，然而这样反倒可能加固一种默认，即把我们当作新移民的“内部外国人”形象，即使移民到美国的是我们的祖辈而不是我们（参见 Cheng 2017, Lowe 1996, Wu and Song 2004）。若想捕捉我们作为移民、难民、劳工等完整且复杂的经历，除了有意识地跨越学科界限，还需要认识到与其他在全球南北方第三世界学者的合作能带来的价值，并将我们的研究建立在他们的基础之上。由此结出的批判理论硕果包括克莱尔·金的种族三角剖分（Kim 1999）和艾明如发现移民限制与新的种族分类之间的联系（Ngai 2004），这些理论既细腻又尖锐。离散学者已经在从事中国和非洲学者渴望在中非研究领域里实现的研究，尤其是在移民、身份和文化等研究领域交汇之处。尽管国家和其他力量的大势正朝相反方向推动，我们作为学术盟友的价值或许值得他们重新评估。

Note

1. For a fuller discussion of the uses of the term Third World in the Special Issue, please see the introduction. (doi:10.1080/13696815.2020.1824779).

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