

# African Studies in China

Cheryl M. Schmitz



A few years ago, I sat in on a graduate seminar on ethics and globalization at a major university in Beijing. The course was taught by a Chinese professor who had done extensive fieldwork in locations ranging from Angola to Ethiopia. More than half of the students in the classroom had also lived in various African countries. They had spent years working at construction companies, charity organizations, or diplomatic offices, and they were now being trained as a new generation of area studies experts.

Scholars gather for discussion at the Center for African Studies, Sun Yat-sen University.

The beginning of the twenty-first century saw an explosion in popular and academic publications on connections and reconnections between China and the African continent. What has attracted less attention, however, is how Chinese academic interest in African Studies has grown alongside diplomatic relations and commercial ties. Africanists in China are building unique academic programs, often based on fieldwork or other on-the-ground experience and in collaboration with African scholars and institutions. Programmatic emphases are often explicitly contrasted against Western traditions of studying Africa, said to have been closely linked to colonial or neo-colonial projects.

In China, the first academic institutions devoted to the study of Africa or of Afro-Asian



A corner of the Institute for African Studies, Zhejiang Normal University.

connections were set up in the 1960s, with the official aim of supporting anti-colonial liberation movements. Recent years have seen the opening of a number of new African Studies centers and institutes, amounting to at least twenty, with over half established within the past two decades. These centers host meetings for scholarly exchange and facilitate the dissemination of written publications and visual media related to Africa and Africans. The Belt and Road Initiative has been accompanied by government support for the study of the Global South, opening up resources for collaborations with African universities and new possibilities for overseas fieldwork by Chinese researchers.

The contributions to this issue of *China Connections* provide a range of perspectives on recent developments in African Studies

in China. The authors highlight some themes that distinguish Chinese Africanism, such as Chinese business and migration networks in Africa or African commercial activity in China. They also raise important political and theoretical questions about the future of the field. Indeed, contemporary Chinese connections to Africa can no longer be thought of as restricted to the economic sphere. Scholars based in China continue to actively produce knowledge about the African continent, and it will be important to consider the implications of this intellectual work.

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## Amidst a China-Africa cultural boom

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Communication between China and Africa has become more frequent in recent years, as many Africans move to China with the hope of fulfilling their dreams. China and Africa, both of which possess a rich cultural heritage, learn more about each other and in turn develop a mutual appreciation and fondness. Out of the common aspiration to further strengthen traditional ties of friendship and promote mutually beneficial cooperation between Africa and China, the Institute of African Studies at Zhejiang Normal University stands out by serving as a platform for cultural exchange and by contributing to a new historical stage for the development of China-Africa cultural relations.

Last year, I wrote an article for the *China Daily* where I described how students at Jinhua Qiubin Primary School in Zhejiang province, China, leapt into the air in a typical African dance routine. The dance was accompanied by the sounds of African instruments, ranging from the mpira from Zimbabwe to specially-designed West African congas. These instruments were so loud and clear that visitors from Africa momentarily forgot they were in far-away China. This is the power of cultural diversity.

Recently, Chinese activities in many African nations have expanded from economic to cultural exchanges, allowing Chinese people to gradually learn more about Africa and its people. The African museum at Zhejiang Normal University and the Jinhua Qiubin primary school both contribute to

the blossoming of China-Africa cultural relations. Since 2015, the primary school has adopted a special type of education that focuses on African culture, the first of its kind in China and a symbol of the symbiotic relationship between Africa and China. The African museum at the Institute of African Studies was the first to be established at a higher education institution in China. It has the largest collection of African artifacts and foreign art at any university since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. I was amazed the first time I came to the Institute to find such a museum in China. Through cultural exchange, the Institute of African Studies is able to teach Chinese people that Africa is not only a cradle of civilization but also a rising continent.

From afar, one sees that the building housing the museum is itself a piece of art. When entering the structure, one encounters diverse artifacts offering various perspectives. This is how traditional African landscape paintings should be experienced, through free shifts of perspective. China and Africa need new possibilities for aesthetic appreciation

and spiritual fulfillment. The Jinhua Qiubin Primary School, meanwhile, has embraced all aspects of African culture, including face painting, designing tribal clothing, manufacturing African musical instruments, and constructing thatched huts. The pupils make masks out of cardboard using designs from different parts of Africa. Anyone who visits the primary school will be amazed at what the pupils do with African arts, fabrics, hair weaving, sculpting, and African musical instruments. The Institute of African Studies has been behind these cultural efforts, trying to show to the African people how the Chinese people respect and appreciate their arts and culture. As people from China and Africa continue to communicate, there will be a cultural awakening, and the Chinese and African people will soon be able to appreciate the great cultural heritage of both sides.

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### Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai

The Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai serves as the hub within the NYU Global Network University system to promote the study of Asian interactions and comparisons, both historical and contemporary. The overall objective of the Center is to provide global societies with information on the contexts for the reemerging connections between the various parts of Asia through research and teaching. Collaborating with institutions across the world, the Center seeks to play a bridging role between existing Asian studies knowledge silos. It will take the lead in drawing connections and comparisons between the existing fields of Asian studies, and stimulating new ways of understanding Asia in a globalized world.

### Asia Research Center at Fudan University

Founded in March 2002, the Asia Research Center at Fudan University (ARC-FDU) is one of the achievements of the cooperation of Fudan and the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies (KFAS). Through the years, the center is making all the efforts to promote Asian Studies, including hosting conferences and supporting research projects. ARC-FDU keeps close connections with the ARCs in mainland China and many institutes abroad.