

FILM REVIEW

Abderrahmane Sissako, dir. *Black Tea*. 2024. 110 minutes. Mandarin Chinese and French, with French subtitles. France, Mauritania, Luxembourg, Taiwan, and Ivory Coast. Gaumont. €19.99.

Black Tea (2024) is the second film cowritten by Mauritanian director Abderrahmane Sissako and Kessen Fatoumata Tall, following their award-winning film *Timbuktu* (2014) from a decade ago. Compared to the César Best Film awardee of 2015, Sissako's new film did not capture as many hearts at the Berlinale after its premiere. Nevertheless, it tells an extraordinary love story spanning continents and cultures, from West Africa (Ivory Coast and Cape Verde) to East Asia (China). The film's cross-cultural and cross-border features are also reflected in its multinational coproduction involving France, Mauritania, Luxembourg, Taiwan, and Ivory Coast. *Black Tea* recounts the romance between a young Ivorian woman, Aya (Nina Mélo), and a middle-aged Chinese man, Cai (Chang Han), a tea boutique owner in Guangzhou, China's "chocolate city," where thousands of African immigrants reside. It sheds light on the scarcely known African immigrant community in China, exploring grassroots interactions that range from the trading milieu to the intimate realm of personal relationships. Moreover, it illuminates the reverse flow of Chinese migration to Africa, presenting a nuanced narrative of cross-continental exchanges and the lives woven through these movements.

The story unfolds first in Ivory Coast. In a town hall, a group of couples, including a Sino-Ivorian couple, are preparing to tie the knot in the presence of the mayor, their friends, and family. However, Aya says no to her fiancé for his infidelity. Passing through the bustling daytime market of Ivory Coast, Aya transitions in Sissako's film to the silent, empty street of Guangzhou at night. Speaking fluent Chinese, she wanders among the vendors and neighbors, whether Chinese or African immigrants, in the so-called "chocolate neighborhood." She works at Cai's tea boutique, where she not only falls in love with Chinese tea culture but also with Cai, the man who spends time with her, teaching her the tea ceremony and tea philosophy. Like other couples, "mixed" or not, they face difficulties, such as Cai's previous failed marriage to a Chinese woman, his long-ago relationship with another African woman, with whom he has a daughter, while running a Chinese restaurant in Cape Verde, and the overt anti-Black racism in contemporary China. Their love transcends cultures, languages, and skin colors, bearing witness to the exchange and interaction of people in the burgeoning China–Africa engagements.

Tea is at the heart of this film. It represents the profound culture of China, an "oriental" country of tea to foreigners. Aya is nicknamed "Black Tea" because, like the black tea, she is warm and moist as jade, with a rich, lingering aroma.

Moreover, Cai himself is also like tea leaves; after years of drying in the sun, twisting, and fermentation, he ultimately produces a refreshing flavor and mellow taste. What makes *Black Tea* a standout film is not just its intimate liaison with the tea culture or the unconventional love story, but the way Sissako combines these elements with integrated Chinese and African cultural symbols, and beautiful *mise-en-scène* in both Guangzhou and Cape Verde. The film's music turns, slow-paced dialogue, and use of light, shadow, and color create a melancholy sensation that can undoubtedly be interpreted as Sissako's ode to Hong Kong master Wong Kar-wai.

The film's storyline was inspired by the director's encounter with a Sino-African couple running a restaurant named "*La Colline Parfumée*" (The Perfumed Hill). Indeed, such couples exist in both China and Africa, resulting from the increasing exchange of capital, goods, people, and knowledge between these two regions. Sissako attempts to depict a utopia where African immigrants and local Chinese live peacefully together: they work and reside in the same neighborhood, they dance together, Chinese people dine in African restaurants or enjoy live music in African bars, and Africans speak fluent Chinese (sometimes even as a vehicular language among themselves), and maintain harmonious relationships with locals, including some policemen. However, this remains, to date, a surrealistic vision, as Africans often suffer from racism, discrimination, spatial and social segregation, and strict immigration policies in China (also shown in the film), while similarly, Chinese migrants in Africa face anti-Chinese sentiment and tend to self-segregate. Nonetheless, the film serves as a sincere invitation for artists, academics, and policymakers to pay attention to the micro-level, people-to-people interactions between China and Africa.

Black Tea seems to have failed to replicate the success of *Timbuktu* and has been a huge disappointment, especially for Chinese viewers. It has scored only 2.6 out of 10 on Douban, China's most popular online platform for music, film, and book reviews. This is partly because, despite being set in Guangzhou, the film was actually shot in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, as China refused to issue the shooting license, seemingly due to COVID-19 measures. As a result, some scenes, such as those depicting food culture, are not visually situated in Guangzhou, and the evident Taiwanese accent in the Mandarin dialogue makes viewers feel out of place. Such subtle feeling of culture dislocation is comparable to the now widely accepted translation of "black tea," which actually equals red tea (*hongcha*) in the Sinophone world, different from the authentic black tea (*heicha*). Beyond these superficial culture inconsistencies, the most controversial issue of this film is perhaps its Orientalist gaze, albeit unintended, exemplified by the ubiquitous red lanterns across streets, in restaurants, and in the market. Despite all, this film is beautifully shot and meaningful in today's manifold divided world.

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