Aspirational Histories of Third World Cosmopolitanism: Dialectical Interactions in Afro-Chinese Beijing

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ABSTRACT

This article follows four years of ethnographic research in Beijing and investigates tropes of "third world solidarity" (termed *disanshijie datuanjie* 第三世界大团结) and "cosmopolitanism" as they are pragmatically recruited or intersubjectively evoked in urban Afro-Chinese interactions. In it, I demonstrate how historical tensions between cosmopolitanism and "third worldism" are mediated through the translation of the intersubjective cultural concepts *guanxi* (关系) and Ubuntu. I ask: How do semiotic horizons of "history" and "culture" become pragmatically indispensable activities through which contemporary Chinese and African subjects establish historical or culturally intelligible grounds for a "novel" interaction under current conditions of South-South educational migrancy? Drawing on a genealogy of pragmatist semiotics and symbolic interactionism (Goffman 1983; Agha 2007; Carr 2011), read through a critical theoretical lens (Fanon 1965; Lukács 2010), I reveal a dialectics of interaction at play in the mediation of historical and cultural dynamics in Afro-Chinese encounters in Beijing. In doing so, this article explores a tension that emerges at the juxtaposition of third world solidarity and cosmopolitan aspiration, one—as I will show—that certainly informs what will come to be among the most pivotal interactions of the twenty-first century: that between China and Africa.

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On a spring evening in 2015, two informants visited my apartment in Beijing's Haidian district. Winston Wang and Watson Liu were two graduate students at Da Hua University, one of the most prestigious academic institutions in China. They had received their English names from an American English teacher and insisted that I use these names to address them in preparation for prospective enrollments at American universities—both had recently completed their GRE exams. Winston and Watson both aspired to go to American Ivy League graduate schools, and at the time I was helping them with their application packages. This was in exchange for interview and focus group participation—a mutually beneficial, but not equivalent, arrangement.[1]

As we slurped from cups of spicy instant noodles and chatted about graduate school abroad, I asked Winston what his plans were if he didn't get into a US university that year. "I will use my English skills to teach Chinese in a Confucius Institute in Egypt," he explained, "then I can apply for the next application round while improving my English." Winston was referencing one of the requirements for teaching in a Confucius Institute (CI): the ability to teach Chinese using English as the medium of instruction. By way of friendly provocation, I sarcastically joked about the irony of Confucius Institutes having to rely on the English language to contest Anglo-Imperialism while funding the aspirations of Chinese graduate students aiming to go to Oxbridge and Ivy League schools. Quoting Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, Winston retorted jokingly: "What does it matter if the cat is black or white?" (不管白猫、黑猫). Indirectly, Winston was indexing the fact that CIs have been explicit not only in denouncing but also in reflexively advocating competitive soft power as an alternative to the Anglo-American cultural hegemony of English for nearly a decade (Gil 2017). Continuing our exchange, which nonetheless masked more serious undertones, I joked with an air of mock sanctimony that using CIs to get into Harvard (one of his chosen schools) seemed to be a betrayal of "third world solidarity" (第三世界大团结). Here, "third world solidarity" (or 第三世界大团结) is an expression invoked with notable frequency when many African and Chinese subjects come into each others' presence. Following this, I suffixed my mock accusation of betrayal with the proposition that the relationship between English and Chinese was "not simply one of black cats and white cats." Winston laughed at this burlesque, then quickly added: "True, but English is the only cat at the moment. I can't go very far with only Chinese."

A US Ivy League university ultimately accepted Winston, but as he was planning his departure, another student was struggling to stay in Beijing. I encountered

1. Fieldwork interviews in this article were conducted between June 2012 and August 2016.

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Edlulayo Zuma, a male South African graduate student studying at Da Jing University, at a soccer match, also in Haidian district. He recently had to defer his graduation so he could renew his Chinese study visa in order to stay in the country and teach English while exploring ways to avoid going back to Johannesburg, our mutual hometown in South Africa. Edlulayo walked onto the Da Hua University soccer pitch in the blazing afternoon sun. There was a large gathering of black African students and myself waiting for a game between our team, Azania United, and the "notorious" Nigeria B to begin—according to other members of Azania United, the "Nigerians always play[ed] dirty." To be sure, this was, unsurprisingly, also something I often heard other teams say about us—"the Azanians are too violent . . . they don't score any goals, but won't let anyone else have the ball either." As though attempting to gain fortitude from the artificial soccer pitch's smell of melting plastic, Edlulayo walked to the middle, where we were warming up, and inhaled audibly, puffing out his chest. After a slow exhalation, he opened his eyes and addressed us: "Comrades, we cannot lose to these Nigerians. We will never live it down." As our manager, Edlulayo cut a curious appearance: he was short, thin, and looked like the youngest among us even though he was in his late thirties. What made him stand out, however, was the fact that he almost always wore an oversized off-white t-shirt with the image of South African Black consciousness thinker Steve Biko on the front—the words, "I Write What I Like" emblazoned next to it, fading against the yellowing cotton. Around his neck—in what turned out to be a deliberate juxtaposition—he wore a massive chain with a giant locket containing the image Mao Zedong. Clasping the locket, perhaps rhetorically invoking the speaker within it, he stated: "When they attack, defend like crazy, but be patient, they are big and get tired quickly. Then we give them hell . . . like real guerilla fighters."

A Pragmatics of History

Referencing both nostalgias for, and historical compromises of, third world anti-imperialism is a common feature of contemporary interactions among and between African and Chinese subjects in Beijing. This historical referencing, I will show, occurs in ways that are explicitly direct and implicitly indirect in their citations and dialectical negations. In this article, I use the analytical juxtaposition of aspirational history to explore dialectical negation not only in terms of its more conventional use by critical and postcolonial theorists (Fanon 1965; Butler 1993; Bhabha 1994; Lukács 2010; Mbembe 2001) but also as its contours emerge in the recent work of pragmatist semioticians (Inoue 2006; Agha 2007; Carr 2011; Wirtz 2014; Nakassis 2016). In both instances, yet in different analytical settings, dialectical negation constitutes an indirect citation and indexical evocation of

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what is being negated: the ideological maintenance of colonial asymmetries through explicit negations of prior colonial orders in the postcolony (Fanon 1965; Mbembe 2001) or within interactional settings where subjects become trapped in constraining and often oppressive orders of enregistered social stratification at precisely the moments they believe themselves to be enacting social transgressions of these very orders (Inoue 2006; Carr 2011; Nakassis 2016).

Working between these ideological and interactional scales, I explore the citation and indirect indexing of third world solidarity histories and aspirational cosmopolitanism in African and Chinese interactions in Beijing through a dialectics of interaction. In doing so, I try to reconcile historical invocations with the pragmatics of their contextualization: the fact that many young Africans and Chinese often have no direct connection to the histories they invoke, on the one hand, and the simultaneous, seemingly contradictory, aspirations of both African and Chinese actors toward contemporary English language-mediated cosmopolitanism, on the other. I suggest that there is a tension that emerges at the juxtaposition of third world solidarity and cosmopolitan aspiration, one—as I will show—that certainly informs what will come to be among the most pivotal interactions of the twenty-first century: that between China and Africa.

In this light, we can understand Winston's and Edlulayo's respective third world voicings and betrayals in the opening vignettes as both recruiting and reconstituting the histories of their originals:

> 不管白猫、黑猫,会捉老鼠就是好猫 (We do not care whether the cat is black or white as long as it can catch mice) —Deng Xiaoping (1962)

> We do not care whether the cat is black or white as long as it can catch mice. —Nelson Mandela (1990)

Twenty-eight years separate these quotes. The respective moments of utterance and citation by these two social reformers are both propagandistically framed and commonly celebrated as turning points in the history of the liberal West's victories over communist authoritarian threats to a democratic and "developing," free world (Rostow 1960). For the speakers of these quotes—Deng Xiaoping and Nelson Mandela—the moments of their mirror voicings were very much typified by a political pragmatism that informed both leaders' betrayals of socialist revolutions in their respective countries as well as the liberation movements that both had devoted their lives to. On the one hand, China's embrace of Nixon and the United States in the late 1970s was instrumental in the fall of the Soviet Union and the denouement of the Cold War (Segal 1992). On the other, South

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Africa's release of Nelson Mandela followed political sanctions that were imposed by the West when the South African Defense Force and its Apartheid government were no longer useful in disrupting Pan-Africanist, and other socialist movements on the continent (Onslow 2009). The process of Mandela's release from prison in 1990—after the fall of the Berlin Wall—and leading up to his eventual presidency, was leveraged in the Western English media as a validation of America and the liberal West's quasi-moral authority to guide the world into an almost "post-national," "globalized," "millennial" epoch (Evans 2016). Within this imaginary, China and other Asian nations would supply expropriated labor; manufactured goods; and grateful, hardworking students to North American and Western European countries in support of a horizon of aspiration and consumption that promised unconstrained and unmarked cosmopolitan mobility for all who dared to undertake this considerable labor of the imagination (Appadurai 1996).

Following this narrative, and as Arjun Appadurai has suggested, the fall of the Berlin Wall set in motion the awakening of a global *imaginaire*—a "constructed landscape of collective aspirations" (Appadurai 1996, 31). It has subsequently been pointed out, however, that "Africa" as an elusive space-time with no clear geographical referent became the nightmarish underbelly of this *imaginaire*, as a number of scholars, including Achille Mbembe (2001), have articulately demonstrated. The relationship between this utopian horizon and its dystopian underbelly is very much still relevant, but it has been rendered significantly more elusive with the rise of China—both its rising, aspirationally liberal, and ambitiously nationalist "middle classes" contributing significant labor to the transformation and maintenance of this global *imaginaire*. I will show, however, that Chinese encounters with Africans reveal contradictions in the construction of such a landscape of aspiration: that its utopic horizon is not only out of reach for subjects who are disproportionately stratified in the hills and valleys of "modernity," but that the very act of aspiration toward a promised history-free, even unmarked, utopia generates the very ideological gravity that stratifies its aspirants.

For "third worldists" in Africa and China—a few of whom are attending Beijing's universities—these quotes index a fractal and reiterative mirroring of historical betrayals of solidarity, an indexing that bridges contemporary cosmopolitan aspirations and "third world" historical imaginaries: just as elite Chinese students' embrace of English cosmopolitanism and American education comes to betray African students' commitments to Chinese education and a Chinese world order, so too does Mandela's endorsement of the cat that can catch mice retrospectively constitute the ultimate tragedy of Deng's abandonment of third

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world solidarity in its historical repetition. For disillusioned African and Chinese students, these moments of utterance point to each other across time, a pointing that constitutes a contingency in both directions: as Mandela's "betrayal" of Anti-Apartheid Pan-Africanists and Socialists—such as communist leader Chris Hani or Pan- Africanist educator Walter Sobukwe—points to Deng's betrayal of Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, so too do Winston and Ed's invocation recruit a history to their respective interactions, thus performatively reconstituting a transhistorical space-time that gives context, while being sustained through their contemporary interactions. This begs an important question of the analyst: How do we theorize the interactional pragmatics of historical recruitment in transhistorical space-time?

This question, I propose, may be explored through the ways in which "history" and "culture" often become conjoined in the service of lending political, rhetorical, or performative weight to claims around the spatiotemporal continuities of solidarity in Afro-Chinese encounters. As I will soon demonstrate, seemingly durable cultural concepts are reflexively drawn on to bolster claims of deep historical ties that, in turn, are expected to eventuate pragmatic alignments that in turn both depend on and sustain solidarity. This is a move well known to anthropologists and historians familiar with the Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) collection titled *Inventing Tradition*. A generation of poststructuralist and postcolonial thinkers have sought recourse to "deconstruction" (Spivak 1976; Derrida 1988) as means to problematized the linearity of such historical instrumentalism, while similarly suggesting that the reiteration of an original discourse object necessarily transforms both its present and constructed-as-contingent past.

This is also something that Frankfurt School companion Walter Benjamin (2007a, 2007b) was preoccupied with throughout his intellectual project—a puzzle, as I suggest elsewhere, manifests prominently in his dialectic of the original and the copy: the copy of a semiotic object in the historical here-and-now constitutes its "original" as a prior iteration by virtue of its present copy. For Benjamin, however, the copy brings the original into being precisely because something about the original appears repeatable—something achieved by virtue of the translatability of its originalness (Schutte 2018).

This is to say that reflexivity over history, its cultural recruitment, and the political effects of its translation very much manifest in the performed ideologies of cultural institutions everywhere and at multiple scales: from national-level soft power cultural institutions (Anderson 1983; Pan 2015), to historical citation during political street protests (Naiker 2016), to everyday interpersonal encounters. In all these instances no meaningful or meaning-producing interactions could unfold without

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dynamic processes of cultural and historical contextualization, where one's identity must constantly be presumed upon, even if it is constantly subject to change.

However, in the case of cultural encounters between Chinese and Africans in China, a question arises: What shared histories and intercultural concepts can be relied upon to substantiate their present, and what historical and cultural subjectivities can be drawn on to animate the aspirations of African students and their Chinese interlocutors? In what follows, I will explore this question in light of the contingencies of cosmopolitan aspiration that imbricate contemporary Afro-Chinese interactions.

(Re)Making Aspirational Histories or How *Guanxi* Became the New Ubuntu

I met Patrice Moji and Fidel Mapfumo during preliminary fieldwork in 2012. Fidel was a recently arrived undergraduate student, while Patrice was a more senior MA student who had been living in Beijing for a few years. Patrice acted as a kind of mentor and guardian for recently arrived compatriots. Both were Zimbabwean students studying at Da Hua University in Beijing. We had planned to have an interview in a quiet coffee shop overlooking a busy street in Haidian district, bustling under an increasingly frequent "blue sky day" in the city. Noting our clean, quiet setting, with muted jazz playing in the background, Patrice commented in an offhanded manner as our coffees arrived, "We truly are cosmopolitans now." Elaborating on this statement, he compared the urban surroundings of Beijing to both his childhood background in Southern Zimbabwe and his experiences as an undergraduate student at the Livingston University Confucius Institute in South Africa, where we first met a few years prior. Perhaps picking up on Fidel's glazed-over facial expression in response to his narration, Patrice concluded with scripted emphasis: "Look how far we've come." As though invigorated by Patrice's conclusion, Fidel nodded approvingly and concurred with Patrice's assessment of a cosmopolitan present: "Yes, coming here [to China from Zimbabwe] is a gateway to heaven." For Fidel, it was important that Beijing was a gateway rather than the point of arrival, since what "heaven" should look like was perhaps less certain than the trajectory that might get one there.

I returned to Beijing two years after this interview. Patrice was still completing his MA degree. As I began my formal fieldwork in the Fall of 2014, I learned that Patrice's teacher, Professor Li (力)—another informant as well as a Chinese language and literature professor at Da Hua University in Beijing—was holding a banquet for a group of his students to which I was also invited. At a certain point during the elaborate dinner, where Patrice and I were seated next to Professor Li, Patrice offered an account of his grandfather's travels to China and the Soviet

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Union as a diplomat. He explained that his grandfather, Mr. Moji, had fond memories of his time in Beijing, and, as a result, many of the boys in their clan received middle names that were suggestive of their grandfather's political alignments—such as Marx, Mao, Lenin, Trotski, and others. Patrice was named after the Congolese third worldist socialist Patrice Lumumba, who was assassinated during a CIA-backed coup in 1961 (De Witte 2001).

Patrice's perhaps overly elaborate setup of his own background story was not without instrumental intent. Before we went to dinner, he confided that he desperately needed Professor Li's recommendation. Without it, he would not be able to maintain his scholarship at Da Hua or stay in China. The narration of his background story at the banquet served to provoke a sympathetic response from the professor, which was assured when Patrice toasted the professor in a brief speech during which he thanked the professor for his guidance and pedagogy over the years—a common practice during relatively frequent teacher-student gatherings in the Chinese Academy. At the conclusion of his speech, Patrice, raising a glass of liquor (or *baijiu* 白酒), proclaimed, "disan shijie da tuanjie" (第三世界大团结) or "to third-world solidarity!" The professor smiled and acknowledged Patrice's gesture by responding in deliberate English, "Third world solidarity!" Patrice then touched the rim of his glass below that of his professor to conclude the ritual with a gentle clink. I learned from both parties later that the professor did, in fact, write the letter of recommendation, and Patrice's scholarship was maintained—an event that, whether engineered or coincidental, was taken by Patrice as evidence of both his prowess in managing social relations as well as the ritual efficacy of historical invocation.

As suggested in the above interactions, tensions between the contingent histories of third world solidarity and cosmopolitan futurities both haunt and animate the unfolding present of Patrice's interaction with Professor Li. The invocation of third world history to maintain Patrice's cosmopolitan aspiration, and the dialectical tension of simultaneous making and remaking, stands as an example of what I call aspirational history (Schutte 2018).

My initial framing of this concept was inspired by the work of Frantz Fanon ([1952] 2008) who, contrary to his reductive interpretation as purely a continuation of, and auxiliary to, genealogies of psychoanalysis, was very much concerned with the pragmatics of postcolonial interactions that seemed to perpetually reproduce colonial asymmetries and exclusions in the so-called postcolony. In his own observations of postcolonial subjects and their disjunctive struggles to reconcile contradictions of racialized, gendered, and classed personhood across the contexts of the colony and metropole, he once identified a similar dialectical propensity as that playing out between Professor Li and Patrice: where postcolonial subjects,

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who invariably come to hold asymmetrical positions in postcolonial interactions, must become both producers of history and recruiters of historicity in their ultimately compromised engagements within a still decolonizing world. In his *Black Skins, White Masks* ([1952] 2008), Fanon explicitly notes the role of spatiotemporal contextualization in providing the weight that grounds signifiers and allows for a distillation of their resulting essentialisms. In his critique of Octave Mannoni's ([1950] 1990) *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, Fanon provokes analysts—of dreams or political economy—to attend to the material conditions within which the signs of memory and alienation unfold. Decrying Mannoni's misinterpretation of the traumatic dreams of colonized Malagasy, Fanon writes: "We must put the dream *in its time*, and this time is the period during which 80,000 natives were killed, i.e. one inhabitant out of fifty; and *in its place*, and the place is an island with a population of 4 million among whom no real relationship can be established, where clashes break out on all sides, where lies and demagoguery are the sole masters. In some circumstances, we must recall, the *socius* is more important than the individual" (Fanon [1952] 2008, 84–85; author's original emphasis). Fanon's spatiotemporalized "socius" emerges as a transhistorical space-time (Agha 2007) that persistently materializes the colonial consciousness in the decolonizing present. I follow Fanon's emphasis that postcolonial encounters are dialectical interactional processes that intersubjectively and pragmatically trouble a simplistic body-mind dualism. For this reason the postcolonial encounter—even with no white bodies present—remains far from open-ended, a state of affairs that significantly undermines postcolonial deconstruction's ultimately relativistic theoretical horizons: this is demonstrated through the ways in which postcolonial and decolonizing subjects still become differentially stratified in their relationships even when colonizers are absent, where the precarity of inhabiting a white mask manifests in the colonized subject becoming his/her own jailor in the postcolonial socius.

Fanon's work, read in this more pragmatist and interactional vein, has affinities with the later symbolic interactionist observations of sociologist Erving Goffman (1983), who noted the inevitable recruitment and leveraging of history as the ground of any interaction, no matter how novel or symmetrically actors appeared to be relationally emplaced from the outset. In casting the interactional and dialectical sensibilities of Goffman in a more Fanonian vein, I suggest that aspirational history constitutes a process through which we can only become someone or claim something through the recruitment of an imagined-to-be-shared historical space-time into the dialectically interactional chronotope of the here-and-now (Agha 2007). Furthermore—and this is crucial in

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both the work of Goffman and that of generations of interactionists and linguistic anthropologists—such a recruitment is only enabled through the motivating presence of authorizing others who allow us to do so: where reception is inseparable from the becoming and subsequent remaking of any semiotic event, and where perspective is part of this dialectical making and remaking or (re)making.

In many scenarios like that in the above vignette, Patrice and other African and Chinese actors have cultivated the capacity to provoke (or at least attempt to cultivate) receptions of selves that transcend the immediacy of an interactional encounter—in Patrice's case, he was counting on a history that he hoped Professor Li would be both familiar with and willing to be recruited to. For Goffman (1959, 1983), this scenario is certainly one shared in social encounters generally. He suggests that novel encounters are in fact rendered possible by the fact that "each participant enters a social situation carrying an already established biography of prior dealings with the other participants—or at least with participants of their kind; and enters also with a vast array of cultural assumptions presumed to be shared" (1983, 4). However, what shared cultural worlds or prior dealings inform Sino-African encounters? What historicity might render them participants of a kind? What are the common and available semiotic registers and languages through which the articulation between prior histories and participant kinds can be mediated? These questions become precisely acute when African youth movements in Africa and beyond look to the Sino-African encounter—as Frantz Fanon once did—as means to usher in "a new history of man" (Fanon 1965, 238).

Such questions would presume the presence of shared language(s) and an ideological context or scheme of ordering within which Chinese and Africans can become socially stratified—for instance along raciolinguistic dimensions (Alim et al. 2016). I have argued elsewhere (2018) that, In Afro-Chinese Beijing, "English" and "whiteness" play an important role in animating the alignments to or from "cosmopolitanism" and "third world solidarity" that I discuss here. In this article, however, my focus is on a contradictory tension between aspirational history as a means to bypass racial, linguistic, and class asymmetries, on the one hand, and aspirational history as the ultimate reinforcement of these very asymmetries through its fetishistic recourse to cultural concepts and historical metaphors in the leveraging of, often compromised, cosmopolitan futures.

Patrice's earlier third world interpellation of Professor Li, as well as his provocation of cosmopolitan solidarity with myself and Fidel, demonstrates that there is more than one representation of self at work in Patrice and indeed in many others' interactional strategies. In Goffman's work (1959, 1983) these sometimes contradictory, but always multiple, representations of self are necessitated by a

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relationship between two semiotic processes: "footing" and "interactional ordering." Footing, in this sense, is a form of semiotic anchoring within a presumed-upon ideological socio-spatiotemporal condition—an interactional order. It is important that the interactional order simultaneously depends—for its salience—on being reconstituted through footing. This puts in motion a dialectical process through which footing and interactional order not only are mutually constituted but also allow for a dialogical reordering as well as maintenance of spatiotemporal signs of history, present, pastness, nowness, and aspirational and emergent forms of futurity that communities of interacting subjects fundamentally depend on in order to maintain a grip on their mutually—as well as perspectivally—constituted realities and aspirations (Goffman 1959, 1989).

In this vein, Patrice's attempt to exploit a kind of social footing by presuming upon, while ultimately revealing, a shared interactional order of third world solidarity to his interlocutor can be understood as an extension of Goffman's insights: that, in our daily interactions, all of us can only find our footing on what we hedge to be intelligible ground that, we hope, is likely to be shared by our interlocutors, and that the success or failure of such attempts at self-representation are both the mechanisms through which ordering takes place and sites that reveal the order already assumed in the interaction. Thus, footing presumes a transcendent ordering—a default interactional order—that must paradoxically be reconstituted through the very process of gaining footing in the unfolding of an interaction. For example, in Patrice's case, his varied invocations of, and alignments to, interactional orders of third world solidarity or cosmopolitanism allowed him not only to gain footings in his engagements with various others in Beijing—Chinese, African, other people of color, or whites in general—but they also permitted his contribution to reanimating and canonizing the interactional orders of third world historicity and cosmopolitan futurity. To be sure, not all of Patrice's interactions with others were explicit, stand-alone, verbal invocations like those discussed in the examples above. Gestures, clothing, media, and technological engagements of various kinds facilitated deferments and alignments to/with others in various social settings certainly abounded. Importantly, however, while it is always possible for Patrice and other Africans in Beijing to potentially adopt a few different representations of self through establishing footings within and through the recruitment of interactional orders, another feature of these interactions must be kept in mind: Patrice and others were neither able to rely on just one account of personhood, as many white expats are able to, nor were they able to move beyond a limited number of representations that were available to clearly marked black foreigners in China.

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While Goffman points out that similar limitations—more than one available mask, but not too many—are a feature of most social interactions, depending on context, he is quick to point out that this availability of representation is not equally distributed among all actors—that the interactional order does not presume an interactional equal opportunism. For many nonwhite foreigners in China—particularly in the case of black, African subjects—both the representational range, as well as the capacities to commit to a "default" identity, are severely more limited than others in the space-time of an international, cosmopolitan, and supposedly unmarked interactional order—a semiotic asymmetry that is quickly becoming a feature of Chinese urban life in particular (Rofel 2007). As Goffman notes: "What is desirable order from the perspective of some can be sensed as exclusion and repression from the point of view of others. It does not raise questions about the neutrality of the term order to learn of tribal councils in West Africa that orderly speaking reflects (among other things) adherence to a rule of rank. . . . Questions do arise when we consider the fact that there are categories of persons—in our society very broad ones—whose members constantly pay a very considerable price for their interactional existence" (Goffman 1983, 5–6). Thus, the establishment of interactional orders through the dynamics of footing is neither an arbitrary nor an equally distributed process. Interactional orders, however spatiotemporally dynamic, are hierarchical and hierarchizing, and it is through their recruitment, as available structures of historical intelligibility, that inequalities come to persist within even the most open-ended propositions of "liberal" personhood—where the presupposition of unmarked social horizons can often be experienced as its dialectical other: a passive-aggressively targeted reinforcement of difference.

The obvious example of this paradox emerges in the "liberal" capitalist societies Goffman was concerned with, building on the initial investigations of pragmatists sociologists like W. E. B. Du Bois ([1903] 1994) and Talcot Parsons (1954). Here, critical race theorist, Kimberle Crenshaw's empirical observations have a strong resonance with Goffman's interactional semiotics—that the motivation of a relativistic multiculturalism as a form of symmetrical equality, appears to engender precisely its other: the widening of social stratification and reinforcement of racial and intersectional alterities (Crenshaw 1991). The context of China differs in obvious ways at the level of governance, institutions, and explicit policy making. However, this does not mean that similar dialectical propensities as those noted by Goffman and Crenshaw are absent at the scale of the micro-interactional everyday. For Patrice and Professor Li, the representations that constitute and are informed by their recourse to footing and interactional

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order are certainly interpretable in this dialectical mode, where the interactional orders of cosmopolitanism and third world solidarity must be reconciled.

A few days following Professor Li's banquet, I sat down and shared tea with him as we often did during my fieldwork. During the five years that constituted my preliminary, intensive, and follow-up fieldwork, he became a valuable informant and friend. On many occasions over the years, he facilitated relations between myself and a number of notable contacts who, like him, were cadre educators or officials of various ranks working at Chinese universities and government institutions. The position he occupied at his university was certainly pedagogical; however, given his social ties, he was notable as a broker between educational, political, and private-sector interactional spheres. In a Chinese context, he would easily be legible as an organization's *guanxi* (关系) artist. Beyond just being "someone who networks well"—for without social relations nothing is possible in China or indeed anywhere—a *guanxi* artist is someone who is particularly skilled at recognizing, building, and maintaining these relationships. The emphasis on an aptitude for recognition and reception, rather than performance and production, is an important nuance in distinguishing the *guanxi* artist from the competent networker.

In anthropologies of *guanxi* (Bian 1994; Yang 1994; Kipnis 1997; Bell 2000) this concept has often been typified through two of its most recognizable manifestations. In the first instance, it manifests as various forms of gift exchange (including money), patrimony networks, as well as both functional and dysfunctional modes of corruption. This tack has been followed, although in more superficial terms, in a number of MBA-style courses and guidebooks providing a variety of perspectives on "how to do networking in China." By focusing on token essentialisms of *guanxi*, however, anthropologists of China have pointed out how such approaches run the risk of reducing this activity to a purely instrumental social practice, lacking specificity in its Chinese context. Here *guanxi*'s more ethical or practice-based dimensions have been emphasized by scholars like Andrew Kipnis's (1997). In Kipnis's work, in particular, *guanxi* cannot be separated from another Chinese intersocial category of "local" meaning: *renqing* (人情). Here, he suggests that *renqing* relationally emerges as a kind of embodied-compassionate disposition that *guanxi* sustains and is sustained by.

For Kipnis, *guanxi* can certainly be understood as emerging in a hyper-local context and existing in equilibrium with *renqing*. Following Judith Farquhar (2002), it can also be argued that *guanxi* does so in ways that are simultaneously particular to, and reiterated through, embodied practices that both constitute and are constituted through an intersocial space-time: that of an anthropologically delineable community, society, or polity (Bourdieu 1977; Munn 1986). In what

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I will now describe, the interactions between Professor Li, Patrice, myself, and many other Chinese and African interlocutors in Beijing extend the tension this work posits between the "cultural" and the "emergent" everyday and attempts to attend to historically situated and political contextualizations of *guanxi* without resorting to historical determinism. In particular, it is worth considering that cultural concepts like *guanxi* may have a vibrant cultural and historical life in Sino-Other encounters that entail third world socialist histories. Diverging from this position, I align my work with critical theoretical analyses that have attended to the ways China continues to make itself through making its others, in relation to external and internal forces that are necessarily ideological and political, but do not provincialize the cultural (Liu 2004; Rofel 2007; Vukovich 2012; Liu 2015; Yang 2015).

Indeed, by all the accounts of Professor Li's peers, he was a superb *guanxi* artist: "So much so," one coworker emphasized, "that he is able to send his children to [an Ivy League] university in America." He was able to do this by having had an illustrious career as a government bureaucrat and academic administrator, through which he secured a hukou (户口) 'living permit' for himself and his family in Beijing. He had reason to be proud of his achievements, as he often emphasized adopting a quasi-American accent: "not bad for a migrant from rural Shandong." He was also eager to share his insights on *guanxi* with a captive, English-speaking audience and was able to master—perhaps as part of this skill set—a genre of self-exoticism that I had seen him perform with visiting scholars from the United States. It was striking that, in these interactions with his US visitors, Professor Li had to juggle two performances. On the one hand, he had to play up China's rising, cosmopolitan educational status as "becoming just like in the US." On the other, he needed to position himself as an expert in "socialist" political or administrative protocol—as a translator of signs that were intelligible "only in Chinese culture." There was a delicate balance between what Patrice might call cosmopolitanism—an unconstrained transnational efficacy—and the making of an argument for his own indispensability by framing his expert knowledge of socialist protocol, including *guanxi* etiquette. Beyond these observations, Professor Li, whom I often assisted in editing correspondence with these visiting scholars, was always welcoming and generous in providing his insights on *guanxi* and socialist matters.

"It's not just giving people money or things, that's the lowest *guanxi*," he emphasized during one interview. "You have to know who you are and what you have when you are making *guanxi*." Here, he emphasized the performance of "who you are" but often was quick to add that it was equally important to calculate "who

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others are to you" in the interaction: "Why would I spend my time on *guanxi* with others?" he asked rhetorically, "I need to want to spend time on them." Then, to my surprise, he proceeded to recruit me into an example: "Take you, for instance, you have a good attitude, but as someone from Africa, you are not as useful to me as an American graduate student or professor. [However], you are easier to build a relationship with, and if there is mutual benefit, that is a good thing for both of us." Here he emphasized the importance of attitude in calculating whether to commit to a *guanxi* relationship, however, and, recruiting me once again to the interaction, he added that both recognition and the capacity to reciprocate constituted key clauses: "You and I both have to understand and meet our mutual obligations to each other . . . otherwise we sabotage one another." Feeling anxious about my interpolation into a relationship that isn't usually brokered through meta-speak, I brought another actor into the frame by asking whether—following the incident at the banquet—he and Patrice had a *guanxi* relationship? "No, we don't," he responded emphatically, and then added, "I don't mean to sound like a bad person, but he can't offer me anything since he is only a student." Nonetheless, Professor Li did write many recommendations over the years for his student and also aligned himself—at least performatively—with Patrice's recruitment to third world solidarity. What this suggests is that neither obligation nor reflexive knowledge about the fact that one may, in fact, be in a *guanxi* relationship are necessary and sufficient conditions to motivate that something like it emerges in an interaction.

This certainly proved to be the case in Patrice's interpretation of the exchange at the banquet. When I asked him about the matter, he added a cultural translation of his own. He regarded his and Professor Li's relationship quite differently, interpreting *guanxi* to be a fundamentally interchangeable concept with that of another intersocial category drawn from his own and my social world: Ubuntu (or something like it). "Look," Patrice insisted, "It's the same as Ubuntu," he told me emphatically over dinner one night, assuming a mutual understanding of the term regardless of the fact that I was from South Africa. His assumption is appropriately suggestive of the Trans-Southern African intelligibility of Ubuntu as an ethical disposition of intersubjective contingency or "a common African humanity" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012, 102). Ubuntu is often explained in English through the phrase: "I exist because you exist" by a number of commentators, including notable public figures such as Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. Patrice's translation—which attempts an iconizing equivocation of Ubuntu as being "the-same-as" *guanxi*—brings one notion of intersubjective space-time in relation to another in such a way that not only does the semiotic range of *guanxi* become extended but also that of Ubuntu—a concept that is seldom

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researched or analyzed beyond its implications for anthropologies of ethics and indigeneity in "Africanist" research and that continues to parochially essentialize "cultural concepts" from the colonial "outside" of the Euro-American academy. Rather than essentializing both Ubuntu and *guanxi*, Patrice's equation of these concepts should perhaps be understood as an attempt to bridge very different theories of social relations that nonetheless allow for intersubjective contingencies and their personhoods.

By way of provoking Patrice's metapragmatics of translation, I responded to his transfiguration of Ubuntu into *guanxi* with a well-known quip among fellow South and Southern African students from a variety of different backgrounds: "I thought Ubuntu was dead?" In post-apartheid and postcolonial settings, this cynical interpretation of Ubuntu is often used to suggest an alienation from the ties of kinship and basic human compassion typified by an increasing commitment to self-interest, such conditions understood as eradicating the underlying ethical space-time of Ubuntu through which "one is a person through others" (Makgoba 1999, 153). Guffawing at my performed postcolonial disillusionment, he paused for quite some time and later said: "maybe Ubuntu is dead for us, but *guanxi* is alive for them." For Patrice, it was enough that Professor Li wrote him the letter, following his particular performance of third world solidarity. Pragmatically, Professor Li's letter writing thus constituted enough evidence—as far as Patrice was concerned—to confirm a surface iconicity between *guanxi* and Ubuntu. Here, anthropologist Summerson Carr (2011) has productively described the perspectival ways in which the motivation of iconicity, in Peircean terms, is ultimately perspectival, where the relationship between signs can be as "similar" or different as interactants need them to be:

> Iconic signs differ from their indexical brethren, which gain their meaning in a contiguous relation to their object (as in the case of smoke and fire) and also from symbols, which have an arbitrary (that is, conventional) relationship with that which they represent. However, the highly contingent and conventional nature of icons—as signs of semblance—was not lost on Peirce, who argued that since anything may resemble anything else, iconic signs are necessarily "motivated." In other words, icons are the product of the analogic practices of language users as they selectively establish relationships of likeness (Peirce 1955). Icons, then, gain their meaning not because they naturally resemble some unmediated thing in the world but instead because a community of speakers collectively designates that one kind of thing is like and therefore can come to stand for another. (Carr 2011, 26)

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Neither *guanxi* nor Ubuntu, are terms that represented an inalienable cultural romance for Profssor Li and Patrice, respectively. Rather, the use of *guanxi* and Ubuntu, in this instance, can be understood as a humanistic attempt to disrupt machine-like, automatic, and bureaucratic social institutions that surround Patrice's educational endeavor and Professor Li's role in managing it by means of managing his own emplacement in these precarious social relations. Both *guanxi* and Ubuntu are seen by Patrice and Professor Li as transcendent cultural justifications for enduring forms of solidarity that are understood to be resisting a contemporary corruption of older expectations of mutual obligation—the residue of organic divisions of labor within mechanical divisions of labor (Benjamin 2007a; Durkheim 2013). In this way, *guanxi* and Ubuntu come to ground third-world solidarity, the romantic promise of a social bondage that mutually excludes the immediate, utilitarian purchase of the "first world" either by China or Africa. At the same time, the dual cultural and historical stakes *guanxi* and Ubuntu are mediated through the term "solidarity." Importantly, both interactants were careful to hedge, despite frequent recourse to such utopic imaginaries of culture and history, that these terms are not immune to historical forces and reappropriation, and certainly do not unfold in an ideological vacuum.

By means of demystifying *guanxi*, despite his own romanticizations, Professor Li often gave his own version of a "*guanxi*-is-dead" sentiment: "You know," he once stated after an unsuccessful meeting with another Chinese colleague "*guanxi* has really changed. When I was young, giving a person a ride in a truck or feeding them some dumplings was enough [to secure loyalty for life]. Now [this is] not the case. It's the same with President Xi, buying friends gets one no loyalty." Having established a "safe space" for *guanxi* meta-speak, Professor Li often came to talk to me about *guanxi* matters, following which he would usually request favors in the form of editing correspondence or providing friends with English lessons or paper editing. Looking over his shoulder and lowering his voice, on another occasion he stated: "You know, under Mao, *guanxi* was a lot more real . . . look, I'm not saying [the cultural revolution] was a good time, but *guanxi* meant more because it was all [we] had." On more than one occasion, when Professor Li was hosting American business scholars, he would emphasize "the importance of networking and *guanxi* in the global economy," at which point he would attempt to introduce me as a "*guanxi* expert" to rhetorically bolster his point through my co-presence—perhaps as some kind of English-speaking token white—after which I would usually be left hanging while he took his visitors out to lunch. Patrice similarly voiced disillusionment with Ubuntu but clearly had faith in a version of *guanxi* that was built on third world solidarity. Of course, both Ubuntu and *guanxi* have seen their fair

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share of appropriation and cosmopolitanization if we consider the corporatization of *guanxi* as an MBA-fetish (as suggested earlier) or the assimilation of Ubuntu into popular culture via Hollywood and the open-source software by the same name.

There are historical contingencies and contiguities haunting Patrice's and Professor Li's accounts. These destabilize and at times lend force to motivations of similarity between *guanxi* and Ubuntu—prior histories of Sino-African encounter that simultaneously trouble and animate attempts at making a "novel" interactional space-time. But what are the kinds of history that might serve as a resource for generating an interactional order? If, as Goffman suggests, the making of an interactional order depends on prior histories between actors; then to understand the making of that interactional order we must take the forms of historical narration undertaken by our informants very seriously. In this case, there is a history and its contemporary contextualization that reveals African and Chinese cosmopolitanism's contemporary foundation in a past third world solidarity. Before it can be addressed, however, it is necessary to spend a moment on what cosmopolitanism might mean for Patrice and other African students.

Cosmopolitan Space-Time

My fieldwork revealed that many African students who come to Beijing consider themselves to be in a position of privilege in the city, an impression that is reinforced by their teachers, professors, and other Chinese students for whom the names of Beijing universities carry considerable national prestige throughout China. Embracing this local cachet—experienced in interactions with aspiring Chinese interlocutors—students like Patrice and Fidel committed to maintaining a specifically efficacious persona, capable of, as they put it, "translating worlds," "being someone back home," or even "colonizing China" one day. Achieving this efficacy and "making it in Beijing" required a similar cultivation and maintenance of a novel and situated means of forging representations—in ways not unlike those demonstrated by Patrice and Professor Li before. Doing so, once again relied on establishing a Goffmanian interactional order (1983). Motivating a cosmopolitan footing similarly entails the cultivation of aspirational histories: the cultivation of *guanxi* or something like it, and the mastery of registers of performance, like knowing when to use "third world solidarity." However, cosmopolitan space-time differs from that of third world solidarity in that an as-yet-unclear future subject of China-Africa relations appears to be the contradictory goal of aspirational historicity.

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Once African students return to their home countries the problem of legibility is as acute in their home countries as in China. In South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria, for instance, Chinese universities are often just not recognized by recruiters or employers, and they are often considered—within African universities—to be a "hand-me-down" education compared to the elite institutions of Euro-American academia. One South African professor affiliated with a Confucius Institute commented in an interview: "Can the Chinese universities even compete with the critical standard here? If not, how can they compete with [European or American] universities overseas?" This perception is also prominent among many African students in Beijing, where many consider their education in China to be a necessary detour for getting into American or European universities. For those who want to excavate the value of a Chinese education, the students must voice a historical past that includes them as a counter to their contemporary precarity. It is when faced with such prospects that for many the term "cosmopolitan"—almost always stated in English—becomes a kind of synchronic refuge, a temporally vacuous value category that becomes a precarious placeholder for uncertain futures mediating perspectival pasts.

Despite an acute, reflexive awareness of these asymmetries—many Africans speak of their presence in the Chinese capital as evidence of their desire for, and achievement of, an unconstrained mobility. This is something that, as Lisa Rofel (2007) has compellingly suggested, is not out of alignment with Chinese migrant experiences in urban China. In both African and Chinese cases, ways of "being cosmopolitan" can vary greatly. They can range from claiming the marketization (and perhaps commodification) of *guanxi*, in the case of Professor Li, to aligning with others who might be perceived as being similarly constrained between perspectival pasts and precarious futures—such as Patrice's instrumental invocation of third world solidarity to sustain residence in China. However, invoking "cosmopolitan" also occurs in contexts where an audience and its potential response is carefully calculated, be it as performing a recognizable sign of long-standing mutual socialist "elitedom"—when addressing an influential American interlocutor—or when performing in an international or global citizenship meant to elide the uncertain, perpetual motion of various trajectories of classed migrancy in China.

Here, a term such as "cosmopolitan" has a particular gloss among my informants, which reveals the temporal, spatial, and social contingencies that the fashioning of an aspirational history both hinges on and is meant to facilitate. When Patrice interpellates both Fidel and myself as "cosmopolitans," his naming does not suggest that we of the "periphery" now occupy a position of privilege within

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the "metropole"—a common alignment that persists among educated "commonwealth" Africans in Britain and the United States. Instead, destinations and points of origin, for Africans in Beijing—and to some extent Chinese migrants too—are subordinate to the capacity to have an efficacy in the world typified by a sense of unconstrained mobility: a capacity to control footing and interactional order in representations of self, by being able to curate the person-determining histories emergent in an encounter. In this sense, "cosmopolitan" might suggest that we of the periphery have always been modern and that this new game, of "making it in the metropole" is a familiar one that we have always already been playing. Keeping Benjamin's earlier provocation in mind—that there is no originary moment without its copy—it may be useful to interpret the alignment to a "new," Sino-African cosmopolitan as simultaneously constituting its prior, colonial other.

However, in approaching what cosmopolitan *is*, it may be useful to ask: what does cosmopolitan *do*? What contextual and ideological factors both enable and push against motivating its iconization? Here, I would like to suggest that it is a sense of efficacious mobility that stratifies the category of migrant, refugee, and mobile elite. The capacity, then, to reflect an appropriate category of personhood that appears to be the inhabitant of such an efficacious body is key to maintaining this quality of mobility. For Patrice and many of my informants, the means of achieving it appears to be language, since it is through both speaking and those activities directed to it that the cosmopolitan becomes legible as an "icon of personhood"—a term drawn from Carr's broader discussion of iconicity (2011).

Through this term, Carr emphasizes the way in which positing utopic and dystopic notions of personhood in institutional projects also necessitate iconization, where iconic signs, as suggested before, "gain their meaning not because they naturally resemble some mediated thing in the world but instead, because a community of speakers collectively, designates that one kind of thing is *like* and therefore can come to stand for another" (2011, 26). In this article, I would like to extend this argument somewhat by prosing that it is perhaps not merely *designation*, as such, that facilitates or disrupts iconization. Rather, historical and material (Marx 1972) or socio-spatiotemporal (Silverstein and Urban 1996) conditions—the "indexical" or "ideological" interplay between actors and contexts—allows iconicity to emerge as a dialectical formation between and through processes of intersocial reception and production. Thus, "designation" must be understood as a simultaneously intersocial and asymmetrical process, in the sense that it is not limited to the causal behavior of individuated, rational actors. Instead, this designation emerges out of a continuous, dialectical relationship between actors and the dynamic mass-mediated spacetime of their context.

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Arguing from the perspective of mass-mediated interactions, anthropologist and semiotician Asif Agha (2007, 2003) has drawn attention to the ways in which mass-mediation arises as a concern for social scientists and humanists, not simply because there are particular technologies available that explicate media presence and social media "propinquity." Moving against a conventional technological or media determinism, Agha (2007) suggests that an important dimension of mass-media explication is the degree to which historically and materially grounded recombinations of subjectivity become central processes and sites of metasemiotic labor in the reception and use of so-called postmodern technological conditions that constantly anticipate the atomization of personhood (Latour 1996; Massumi 2002; Mackenzie 2002, 2010). Agha notes:

> As we begin to enter mass mediated spacetime (or, rather, orient ourselves to its existence; we—i.e., you and I—are already in it, as you read these lines), and consider the varied forms of our living participation in it, certain sources of worry briskly begin to become apparent. . . . [W]e—even as we align most avidly to idea(l)s of autonomy and uniqueness—come to be "made up" as persons, as a matter of course, of role-fractions that are sedimented within us by semiotic encounters. Beneath the surface of this glassy essence lie—as yet untheorized—forms of communicative process through which messages flow back and forth, near and far, folding over the spacetime of discrete individuality, making selves who have never met partial analogues of each other. (Agha 2007, 334)

Mass-mediation in the twenty-first century appears to escalate the risk of alienated personhood (individual or intersubjective), particularly through social-media processes that seemingly heighten "role-fractions" that only come to be "sedimented within us by [and through] semiotic encounters." I would further add that such forms of "sedimentation"—which are necessary to ground personhood—are brought into sharper relief when the analyst pays attention to interactions that must constantly recruit outside forms in order to generate, as though always already present, precariously "partial" internal intelligibilities between participants—a relationship between interactionist semiotics and mass-mediation that has been rigorously demonstrated in the scholarship of Constantine Nakassis (2016). In this regard, conditions of mass-mediation also appear to provide materials for the indexical forging of recombinant selves through a mostly shared (however partial or unequal) socio-spatio-temporal capacity to recruit and activate densely affective spacetimes among communicating subjects.

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Agha's interpretation of this socio-spatiotemporal capacity is, to be sure, heavily informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) formulation of the dialogical chronotope—an analytic that has been used in pragmatist semiotics to capture socio-spatiotemporal interplay between language and its simultaneously ideological and interactional contextualization (Eisenlohr 2006; Agha 2007; Wirtz 2014). However, I feel that the affective dimensions of chronotopic social life—which are not a concern in this research—could be extended theoretically. What chronotopes might reflexively 'feel' like has important implications for the study of interactional semiosis and its pragmatic effects, since subjects' affective commitments to mass-mediated chronotopes and their socio-political effects, serve to underscore the value of this concept not only as an analytical metaphor for depicting the social phenomena they capture, but potentially as a human capacity that is essential for navigating traumas of an alienating modernity (Schutte 2012).

An attentiveness to the chronotope as experience and as affective investment among actors attempting to calibrate the socio-spatiotemporal contingencies of their trajectories through the world would allow semioticians and linguistic anthropologists to go beyond analyses that tend to depict chronotopes as purely analytical and descriptive metaphors through which to describe interactional phenomena that interacting subjects may or may not be aware of as they flit in and out of participation frameworks. The utility of such an attentiveness is that it may reveal why actors remain ideologically invested in often self-sabotaging commitments to history and personhood, despite the "postmodern" proposition that all interactions are ultimately open-ended. To this end, and in my concluding section, I would like to explore an affinity between Bakhtin's (1981) chronotope and György Lukács' (2010) framing of the term *Sehnsucht* that is central to understanding aspirational history as a dialectics of interaction.

Chronotopes of Third World Nostalgia

The tone of the relationship between the Chinese nation-state and its African interlocutors in the past differs in important ways from contemporary intergovernment exchanges. A more explicit third world solidarity once animated relationships based on alignment to, or disalignment from, an anticolonial proletarianization of the non-Western world. This was indeed not only the case in obscure intellectual circles, among progressive thinkers in Asia and Africa, but it also formed a constant theme in widespread propaganda campaigns in what came to be called the "third world" (Chakrabarty 2005). One famous propaganda image

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I encountered belonged to Fidel and was pasted on the wall next to his bunk bed in his residence at Da Hua University. I found out, through the course of my fieldwork, that it had in fact been given to him (after being downloaded from chineseposters.net) by his older roommate, Patrice. The characters on the image read 革命友谊深如海 (*geming youyi shen ru hai*) 'Revolutionary friendship is as deep as the ocean.' Designed by well-known propaganda artist Guo Hongwo, this is an iconic image of the third world solidarity genre. It depicts a variety of African travelers—men and women—who have presumably come to China, posing with Chinese workers in front of modern farm equipment, presumably produced in China. A black African man, wearing (at the time) Western formal attire, is kneeling to take a photograph. There is a black African woman on his right, presumably providing instructions to those being photographed to get into the frame. I asked why he put it next to his bed and he joked: "To remind me of the good old days." It is worth noting that Fidel was nineteen years old at the time of the interview.

Thus, to talk about a nostalgia, in the case of Fidel's and Patrice's sharing of images like these would be misleading, since neither of them will have been able to remember the third world solidarities that played an important role in generating their socialist first names. In understanding this kind of nostalgia projected onto shared objects like Fidel's poster, Lukács' (2010) notion of Sehnsucht becomes useful analytic to explore affective states that conventionally theorized chronopic evocations might imbricate. "Longing," Lukács states, "is always sentimental—but is there such a thing as sentimental form?" (2010, 123). Of course, for Lukács, what he meant by "longing" was Sehnsucht— suggesting unattainable desire that appears to precede, yet which is not necessarily knowable by, the experiencing subject. In this sense, the chronotope may well have been the kind of "form" that Lukács was looking for: a sign vehicle through which Sehnsucht as spatiotemporally complex sentiment might become both intelligible and "felt" as a nostalgic and historical projection of embodied, unattainable desire. Here, the Sehnsucht has a temporal texture that augments its English translation, but one—like other ethnographic categories of spatiotemporal transcendence—that necessitates its own socio-spatiotemporal envelope, or chronotope. Sehnsucht, in this sense, chronotopically imbricates a portable indexicality that may not necessarily entail an explicit past or a present, but that is nostalgically palpable to the experiencing subject, even if they have no direct personal experience of the temporal trajectory associated with the nostalgic object—like an old propaganda poster, cassette, or radial telephone. Since the past becomes available to inhabitants of a present committed to the conventions of a linear social temporality, this longing, or Sehnsucht,

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becomes available in the emotional domain of sentiment—where sentiment is the projection of longing onto a lost personal past, so often manifesting around discourses of memory loss or the melancholia of nonpermanence.

In many popular or propagandistic Western historicizations of the contemporary Sino-African encounter (in China and Africa) often contradictory evocations of Sehnsucht abound, manifesting in paradoxical narrations of the relationship between past and present. One prominent contemporary historical narrative in the Western media Anglosphere emphasizes imaginaries of Tang Dynasty explorations, where Chinese Admiral Zheng He and his merchant fleet encounter Africans and set the historical tone for a long, deep friendship based on mutual benefit and friendship. Here, the reciprocation of African gifts of gold and giraffes to Chinese emperors serves as confirmation of enduring peaceful ties built on the shared abundance of natural and economic wealth (Alden 2007; Power et al. 2012; Li and Farah 2013; April and Shelton 2014; Batchelor and Zhang 2017; Ziso 2018). This history has been emphasized ironically, but it has also been voiced in alignment with alternative modernities, and modernization theory perspectives. The latter, in particular, have emphasized civilizational histories of Imperial China's relationship to the "modern" West (Rostow 1960; Brautigam 2009). However, these evocations often—perhaps conveniently—interrupt another narration: of a deep friendship built on the mutual struggle of the third world's fight against the forces of Western imperialism; of the announcement of Three Worlds at Bandung in 1955; of Chinese premier Zhou Enlai's historical visits to Africa to broker the emergence of a "new history" for the world's colonized, "semi"-colonized, and decolonizing; of China's own gifts of weapons and education in exchange for continued third world solidarity (Chakrabarty 2005; Barnouin and Yu 2006; Lee 2010; Okihiro 2016). It is obvious that the Western media Anglosphere, at present, is reluctant to emphasize "red" history in voicing the contemporary foundations of Sino-African relations—an elision that has not gone unnoticed. The historical legacies of the Three Worlds Theory as a proletarianization of the colonized and semicolonized world, as well as significant third world solidarity support for China's seat on the UN Security Council, following the decades of decolonization, are swiftly forgotten. They emerge, however, in chronotopic evocations of Sehnsucht on the part of contemporary Chinese and African actors: through disconnected triggerings of inherited nostalgia, not only in the ironic voicings of Maoist cosplay in contemporary Chinese wedding photography but also in the African and Chinese subjects' use of "past," chronotopically evocative artifacts, such as Edlulayo's Mao Zedong talisman, to act as a placeholder or aspirational history for a precarious present and uncertain future.

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Aspirational history making in Sino-African encounters thus reflects a similar dialectical tension to that proposed in my chronotopic framing of Lukács' Sehnsucht: the brokering of a kind of cosmopolitanism through the invocation of a mediated, yet inaccessible, history of third world solidarity makes the third world cosmopolitan a similarly transcendental category of desire.

Conclusion

I have argued that historical contradictions—imbricated in the interactional dynamics of "contemporary" and "historical" Chinese and African actors—are neither obviated nor merely accumulative. Rather, they are suggestive of a revised methodological approach to studying intra-non-Western relations—one that must grapple with the ways non-Western subjects are compelled to recruit or improvise histories to ground their contemporary engagement beyond the ambit of "the West." In turn, I have suggested that this recruitment and improvisation may also come to constitute compromised histories that can and must nonetheless be relied upon to forge the as-yet uncertain future subjects of a Sino-African encounter. The approach I delineated in this article—analyzing a social practice I termed aspirational history—attempted such an engagement.

For contemporary Chinese and African subjects who have to confront the pragmatic burden of their own constant contextualization—having to perpetually motivate an aspirational history that constantly appears on the other side of a receding horizon of personhood—every narration of historically contingent identity necessarily transforms the very original upon which claims of a deep past, cultural authenticity, and aesthetic standard rest. Such actors, however, are also invoking histories directed toward mediating futures that are precisely contingent upon such perspectival pasts. In a sense, they must become alchemists of aspirations. It is my hope that aspirational history, as I have presented it in this article, depicts an added possibility—where the invocation of the past not only constitutes the present of its utterance but also the potential—however occluded—of a desired futurity. However, for many, such "aspirational time travel"—as the preceding encounters have demonstrated—constitutes a fundamentally stratified horizon of personhood and possibility, one that is rarely achieved (with varying degrees of failure) by non-White subjects in a still-far-from-decolonized encounter.

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