Choreographing “ChinAfrica” through Transnational Encounter

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Abstract

A dance film made by two Belgian directors collaborating with Guangdong Modern Dance Company, An African Walk in the Land of China (2015) attempts to explore the encounter of an African woman with Chinese workers in urban China in the age of “ChinAfrica.” In this work, the co-directors create a “duet” between an ensemble of Chinese dancers portrayed as blue-collar workers and a black female dancer depicted as a woman from an unspecified country in Africa. In my analysis, I juxtapose choreographic and cinematic representations of the African woman and Chinese workers with the complex social reality of their diverse experiences of encounters. Resisting any singular reading, the dance film provokes questions and stirs up reflections about the ever-intensifying interactions between Chinese and Africans at economic, political and cultural levels operating under global capitalism. This seemingly detached approach, while offering opportunities for multiple readings of the film, also glosses over the complexity of the very ideas of Africans and Chinese as well as their transnational encounters. The gap between the filmic representation and reality unveils the directors’ reductionistic approach to representing ethnic figures and their experiences of each other on screen, indicating a persistent but well-masked colonial gaze.

Keywords: screendance, Africa, China, gaze

Introduction

The advent of the 21st century has witnessed increasingly more intimate relations between China and countries in the African continent. The Forum for Africa-China Cooperation created in 2000 as well as China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 promoted the flow of capital, labor, and natural resources between these two parts of the world. With substantial investment from China, the African continent, particularly sub-Saharan Africa, has experienced the influx of over two million Chinese workers and a growing range of Chinese activities. Reciprocally, hundreds of thousands of Africans have also embarked on journeys to China to seek new opportunities. The ever-intensifying economic relationships between China and countries in Africa have led to increased people-to-people interactions between...
Chinese and Africans. As a result, there also appears an increasing number of media productions, particularly documentaries and fictional films, that engage with stories about their encounters, explore the Chinese diaspora in Africa or the African diaspora in China, and offer various perspectives on China-Africa relations. Shot in the city of Guangzhou, the most popular destination for African migrants in China, “An African Walk in the Land of China” (2015, 14min) is the first internationally circulating experimental dance film that addresses this interracial and transnational encounter in a Chinese urban space.

Commissioned by the City Contemporary Dance Company in Hong Kong and premiered at Jumping Frames International Video Dance Festival, this film is a transnational collaboration between Guangdong Modern Dance Company and two Belgian directors, Pierre Larauza and Emmanuelle Vincent. In this work, the co-directors create a “duet” between an ensemble of Chinese dancers portrayed as blue-collar workers and a black female dancer depicted as a woman from an unspecified country in Africa. Analyzing this work in light of recent economic and sociocultural activities between China and various African nations, I ask the following questions: how does this film imagine the encounter between an African woman with Chinese in this urban space? How do choreographic and cinematic elements work together to depict their encounter, and why are these choices made? What kind of social reality is evoked through these artistic expressions? And does the film project a particular stance on Africans’ experiences in China or comment on China-Africa relations?

In this article, I engage with theories of transnationalism and sociological studies on Africans in China. First, I will first probe the term “ChinAfrica” used by the directors in the synopsis of the film to provide the larger historical and social context that sets the stage for this work. Then, I will perform two rounds of readings of this film: a close textual analysis that derives an understanding of the dance film from its choreographic and cinematic elements, followed by an over-reading of the work that attempts to unpack several recurring signs appearing in the film through its wider social context. Finally, alluding to some ambiguity in the film that resists easy conclusion and value judgment, I will offer several possible and even contrasting readings of the work.

**Contextualizing “ChinAfrica”**

The co-directors provide the following synopsis (with some grammatical issues): “In the contemporary labor China, an African young woman roams in streets in search of a meeting. She crosses workers in her wandering. How will they welcome mutually at the age of “ChinAfrica?” This statement reveals the historical context of this film - the age of “ChinAfrica.” I define “ChinAfrica” as a transnational and translocal space where Africans and Chinese interact at economic, political and cultural levels. These intimate connections between China and many countries in Africa exhibit multiple dimensions
of global cultural flow as articulated by Arjun Appadurai’s notion of -scapes. These -scapes are manifested as the following: the unprecedented numbers of migrants to both the African continent and China as part of the ethnoscapes; China’s involvement in media production in Africa, forming part of the mediascapes; China’s act of providing loans for many African countries in finanscapes; the proliferation of the Confucius Institute in Africa as well as the increasing number of African students studying abroad in China as components of ideoscapes; and finally, China’s investment in the telecommunication industry in many countries in Africa as a manifestation of technoscapes.

These dimensions of interrelations also led to inventions of new rural and urban space in both China and countries in Africa. According to Henry Lefebvre, space produces and is produced through relations of production. In other words, space sets conditions of possibility and is generated through the interaction of everything in it, such as human activities. Lefebvre’s theory of space offers an explanation for the transformation seen in neighborhoods in Chinese cities as well as many places in African countries where demographic shifts and new human activities resulting from cross-continental migration have reconfigured rural and urban spaces. The city of Guangzhou, where this film takes place, is a case in point. The rise of diasporic African communities has brought into the city new restaurants, shops, and other types of businesses. The districts where they tend to congregate have gained new names such as “Chocolate City,” “Little Africa,” and “Guangzhou’s Harlem.”

This multidimensional global flow that transforms both space is never inherently neutral but motivated by different objectives. The ever-intensifying China-Africa relations have received much scrutiny from a wide range of perspectives. The Western press and some scholarly writings denounce Chinese engagement with Africa as a form of neocolonialism through the expansion of soft power. However, a number of scholars recognize the much more complex dynamics at work that resist being explained through paradigms of neocolonialism. The idea of “ChinAfrica” points to a wide range of heated debates surrounding the economic and political relationships between China and Africa and their implications for the world order. While Chinese activities in Africa have gained spotlights in both academic and non-academic press, stories of Africans in China have received much less attention. “An African Walk in the Land of China” sheds light on interpersonal transnational encounter only made possible as a result of this large-scale phenomenon. Rather than focusing on Chinese in Africa, the film explores an African’s experience in China. In what follows, I attempt two different ways of reading the film to understand how the co-directors portray this encounter.
Attempt #1: A Close Reading of the Film

This is how I first experienced the film as a viewer who did not have much knowledge about the large presence of Africans in various Chinese cities, particularly in Guangzhou.

Scene 1. The film opens with a panning wide shot that gradually reveals ten Chinese workers. Dressed in identical blue uniforms and wearing anti-pollution masks, they lie on their stomachs with their heads turned to the side near a waterfront. Behind them the faintly visible skyline of the hyper-industrialized city of Guangzhou appears across the Pearl River under the dark gloomy sky. Cut. A still shot of the interior of a construction site piled with debris of shattered bricks. A grey mouse is scurrying around. Cut. Two adjacent shots of the exterior of the construction site. The demolished low rises pale against a high rise that is under construction. Cut. Underneath the inner-city highway that flies over the city, ten Chinese workers lie on their sides in front of a woman dressed in a bright patterned dress that is often associated with an African-style garb. She plants her body firmly on a pedestrian bridge, center framed. The camera slowly dollies in towards them, creating smooth motion that disrupts their silencing stillness. Her upright body contrasts sharply with their collective horizontal body spread out on the ground, suggesting that they are in separate worlds though sharing the same space. These carefully constructed shots work together as a grand establishing shot that frames the encounter between an African woman and Chinese workers in a hyper-modern city that undergoes continuous renewal.

Scene 2. On the same pedestrian bridge, she holds still, her body upright, fixing her eyes straight ahead. They crowd around her, pushing her forward in tiny but speedy steps. They direct their heads toward her but do not directly gaze at her. Cut. The camera dollies in as she reaches her arms into the sky and then stretches them behind her, lifting her shoulder blades and undulating her entire back. She smiles. Like her guards, they hold their bodies in absolute stillness and alertness, lining up in two rows of five on each side of her. They wear no expressions on their faces. The dolly effect of the camera creates an illusion of movement, as if they are transporting her forward on a vehicle, this time, with no need to directly contact her body. These two types of bodies, with their gazes never crossing paths, share the same space in close proximity but not yet encountering.

Scene 3. She slowly wanders through a busy street, passing by pedestrians who simply walk past her without acknowledging her presence. Her well-put-together outfit that signifies her Africanness makes her highly visible on the street and exaggerates her foreignness in this land. They, individually or in a group, push against a wall, sit in a restaurant, crawl on the back along a grocery aisle, and spin around near a staircase, implying that they are actively engaging in their mundane daily activities, eating, working and resting. Cut. Positioned in the center of the frame, she fixes her body in front of a gigantic excavator digging and flipping the soil among a thick pile of debris.
They, however, playfully interact with various objects at this construction site, sitting on a coil of metal, tip-toeing on a manhole, and crawling out of a pipe. They line up, congregate tightly and then dash out into the space, jumping and spinning. Situated amongst them, she acts as a detached observer quietly taking in all of these actions. She and they not only occupy a different kind of space but also demonstrate a different relationship to space. Their more intimate interaction with various sites imply a sense of familiarity with the space, sharply contrasting with the African woman’s explorative relationship to space that signifies her position as an outsider.

The choreography of the camera implements distinct techniques and reinforces the construction of the African woman as someone who sees, while the Chinese workers are being seen. Dynamically situating the camera amongst their bodies presents close-up shots of a “de-territorialized choreography.” By not including their gaze in the frame, these shots imply that the Chinese workers are immersed in their own activities, not aware of being seen. Contrarily, when filming her, the camera consistently presents either a center-framed wide shot or medium shot of her body, revealing her uptight posture and active gaze in search of something. At times, the camera follows her from behind, granting viewers an almost embodied perspective of her visual field. This position of the camera emphasizes her point of view instead of theirs.

Scene 4. The relationship between the African woman and Chinese workers takes a dramatic turn in the next scene from indirect engagement to face-to-face interaction. Alone in a deserted building, she folds a red doormat in front of her waist. The very instant when she opens it up, the workers appear on screen from behind the columns at the site, dashing towards her. They turn their bodies, toss their arms, kick their legs, and bend their hands. She looks forward quietly without engaging in eye contact with them, holding a red doormat that says, “Welcome” in both English and Chinese. It is not clear whether she is welcoming them into her space or if she is seeking welcome from them. Point-of-view shots of her and them are both inserted in this sequence, revealing their experiences of each other from both of their perspectives. Cut. They carry her around and position her on the red mat. She obeys. They look at her while she gazes straight forward, still avoiding any direct eye contact with them. Cut. They walk away while leaving one of them to share the empty space with her. One of them pushes her shoulder. She responds by moving her spine. Sharing an intimate space of a tiny rectangular doormat, she and one of them converse through their distinct movement languages, her movement indicating African aesthetics and theirs an unmarked postmodern dance. With little eye contact and only occasional physical touch throughout the scene, she and they seem to just happen to share the same space but fail to communicate with one another.

Scene 5. The last scene lasts for more than one third of the entire film. On a rooftop, against the skyline of the modern city of Guangzhou, in extreme slow motion, she runs towards the red doormat while they leap, turn, and twirl from outside the frame to land
inside until eventually they collapse onto the floor, recalling the opening scene of the film when they were also lying on the ground. She lifts up her dress to reveal her bare feet. Bending her elbow, she moves her shoulder blades forward and back. Looking straight ahead and wearing a gentle smile, she looks forward into the camera, again center framed. The screen gradually fades out into black.

She and they, traditional and modern, outsider and local, single and ensemble: these are sets of binaries that the dance film establishes. Through the costume choices, choreography, the performers’ intersubjective relationship embodied on screen, and cinematography, Larauza and Vincent dramatize the differences between the African woman and Chinese workers, portraying them as personae who share little in common except for being present in the same temporal space. Dressed in garb of vibrant colors and intricate patterns, her dark skin stands out amongst the collective body of Chinese workers who dress in plain blue uniform. While they blend together multiple movement styles, at times pedestrian, at times theatrical, at times a fusion of all kinds of gestures, and at times with a twist of Chinese martial art influence, she performs Africanist movement, popping her chest, undulating her back, and throwing her arms forward and backward with a controlled looseness. Although there are instances when she looks at them and they look at her, their gazes never land on each other simultaneously. This consistent absence of mutual gaze further suggests a failed encounter between them. The choreography of the camera approaches filming the African woman and Chinese workers in distinct ways. The African woman is mostly situated in the center of the frame, gazing into the camera as if she is performing for the camera. Chinese workers, on the other hand, never stare directly into the camera. They are portrayed as natives who only mind their own business, trapped within the hyper-production of capitalist modernity.

**Attempt #2: An Over-reading of the Film**

This is how I experienced the film by reading into three recurrent representational signs, namely, the hyper-modern cityscape of Guangzhou, an African woman, and Chinese workers, against accounts from the body of recent literature on Africans in China.

The hyper-modern city of Guangzhou, traversed by highways, spiked by skyscrapers, and overwhelmed by omnipresent construction sites, sets the stage for the encounter between the African woman and Chinese workers. This backdrop is not merely an imaginary construction of space achieved through careful selection of the sites, camera framing and composition. Instead, it provides a realistic documentation of the rapidly changing landscape of the city at the moment of this film production. Positioning the African woman and Chinese workers in the dance film against the realistic backdrop of the city, the dance film summons the viewers to read their representations as embodying the lived experiences of Africans and Chinese in this transnational city.
With its rapid economic development, China has been frequently framed in many Africans’ imagination as “a new land of opportunities,” attracting hundreds of thousands of migrants (men and women alike) to set their foot on this land and chase “gold.” Since the end of the 20th century, Guangdong, a province in the southeast corner of China, has become the major trading site for industrial goods in China with a strong labor-intensive manufacturing economy, even acquiring the reputation of the “world factory.” Guangzhou, the capital city of Guangdong Province, immediately became the most popular destination for African traders who would travel to the city to purchase Chinese manufactured goods in bulk for resale in their home countries. Since early 2000s, the number of Africans visiting or living in Guangzhou has reached an unparalleled high in the history of the region. These migrants have tended to cluster in the same neighborhoods in the city, leading to a change of their demographic composition in various districts such as Sanyuanli and Xiaobei. Most of the scenes in the film were taken place in Xiaobei, the so-called “Little Africa.” This deliberate location choice evokes this social process of migration and place-making.

The appearance of the gigantic excavator on the street of Xiaobei in one of the scenes also invokes the urban renewal project taken place in 2014 in this neighborhood as part of a larger initiative that aims to create a “clean, safe, and orderly” Guangzhou. “An African Walk in the Land of China” was made at the beginning stage of this project that eventually drove out many African populations and the businesses they had established. While the Western press critiques the anti-black racism that prompted this project, Wilczak challenges this common assumption, arguing that this special transformation should also be understood in the context of Guangzhou’s efforts to become a competitive “global” city through neoliberal restructuring. Who is this woman? What does she think of this urban renewal project and its entangled relationship with the Chinese discourse of race? Is she confused? Is she angry? Is she amazed? Does she care? The dance film does not provide any answer. In front of the excavator, the African woman simply looks around, observing the space without giving away any visible hint of her emotional state.

A large amount of literature on Africans in China zoom in on traders from sub-Saharan Africa who represent the largest African population in China. These traders actively participate in the non-hegemonic world economy of “globalization from below.” Robert Castillo, however, problematizes this narrow understanding of Africans’ experiences in Chinese cities. He underscores the complex and diverse trajectories of these individuals from various countries in Africa who are driven into transnational mobilities between their countries of origin and Guangzhou for a wide range of reasons and purposes. Some intend to stay in Guangzhou; some recurrently visit the city; and some others only pass through Guangzhou in order to go elsewhere. This view challenges the common misconception that regards Africans as a homogenous population.
How does the African woman, as the protagonist of the film, fit into the multifaceted experiences of African migrants in this city? *Who is this woman?* Which African country is she from? Is she a trader, an exchange student, a tourist who happens to pass through Guangzhou, or a college graduate who is exploring new life opportunities? Rather than specifying and locating the African woman, the dance film offers little sign that indicates her identities. With quite a stretch, one may be able to argue that her outfit suggests that she is of middle class background.\(^2\) This possible indication would be consistent with demographic studies of Africans in China who tend to be well educated and of higher socioeconomic class compared to African migrants in European countries and Chinese internal migrants.\(^3\) In this case, this portrayal of an African woman would have countered the dominant representation of a black woman as backward, poor, and of low socioeconomic class in Western media. However, by offering very little information that helps the audience understand who this African woman is, the directors provide a highly abstracted depiction of a much more diverse and heterogeneous population. In this representation the absence of details about her mark her within a colonialist gaze where her (generalized) African subjectivity is never fully interrogated or represented. She becomes an uncontested sign that represents “an African” and perhaps also “Africa” confronted with Chinese modernity.

While the dance film portrays the African woman as an outsider exploring a new urban space, the Chinese workers are presented as locals who are familiar with their environment. Roberto Castillo problematizes the rhetoric employed in scholarship that frames Africans’ presence in the city simply as a binary of foreigners vs. a “fixed” Chinese local population.\(^3\) He argues that “rather than a group of foreign migrants encountering a settled local population, Africans in the city mainly intersect and interact with ‘Chinese’ individuals on the move: ‘internal migrants’ of different ethnicities.”\(^3\) Zhou, Xu and Shenasi affirm Castillo’s argument by noting that the majority of Chinese with whom Africans interact tend to be internal migrants who share the similar experience of precarity and transiency.\(^3\) Thus, the choice of portraying the Chinese as a collective ensemble of workers who are dressed in uniforms that resembles the Mao Suit, a symbol often associated with socialist modernity,\(^3\) seem to stand at odds with this capitalistic heterogeneous space.

The intersubjective relationship between the African woman and Chinese workers in this dance film alludes to inter-racial interaction between Chinese and Africans in this city. Zhou, Xu and Shenasi point out that for self-made African entrepreneurs and traders, they have developed an interdependent economic relationship with Chinese entrepreneurs.\(^3\) Though frictions do arise due to their cultural differences, their economically interdependent relationships “create room for cooperation that transcends race, class and migrant status.”\(^3\) To facilitate this interdependency, they also find various tactics to overcome language barriers, for instance, through using a calculator, performing basic body gestures, and learning to speak simple words in each
other’s languages. In contrast, many other accounts of their interracial interaction focus on African migrants’ experiences with local authorities who frequently carry out immigration raids and random visa checks, especially when major international events are taking place in Guangzhou. While some Africans feel unwelcomed and discriminated against, some also express that they are treated with much more respect than if they were in a European country. The literature highlights that there is no one single narrative regarding how the Chinese and Africans interact.

In this dance film, the African woman and Chinese workers dance out an ambiguous power relationship. It is not confrontational, not cooperative, not one-sided, nor is it discriminatory in any obvious way. Despite having some face-to-face interactions, the African woman and Chinese workers are portrayed as disinterested in each other. Associating these recurring signs in this film with the social reality of Africans’ experiences in Guangzhou, I find the dance film too elusive to comprehend. Who are these people? On the one hand, the co-directors appear to be making a connection to the lived experiences of an African visitor in Guangzhou by situating her in the neighborhood where African migrants populate. On the other hand, they also seem to be unconcerned about making any references to their wide-ranging experiences in the city. Without adding much specificity about the African woman, the Chinese workers, and their relationship with each other and to the sites, the dance film projects a generalized narrative onto a complex social, cultural, and economic landscape. Thus, in its reliance on certain aesthetic juxtapositions (e.g., Chinese, African, traditional, modern), it falls short in complicating the socio-economic realities of these two communities living next to one another in contemporary Guangzhou.

**Conclusion: Artistic Abstraction or Essentialist Reduction?**

Approaching this dance film based on its filmic and choreographic texts and re-examining it as an artistic rendition of a social phenomenon, I have generated different perspectives towards this work. Its many layers of ambiguity due to its lack of specificity render multiple readings. On the one hand, I applaud the film for engaging in the exploration of an inter-racial relationship beyond the classic black-white dichotomy. Its lack of specificities in the portrayal of their relationship may be seen as an artistic choice for opening up interpretation of the power dynamic between the racialized subjects, rather than situating them into a fixed category of domination and subjugation. By invoking the Chinese workers and African woman in a dynamic city space that is going through reconstruction, the dance film invites us to reflect on the role of neoliberal global capitalism that brings people together across the continent for the purpose of serving the very machine of capitalism, rather than encountering each other in an intimate or empathetic level. On the other hand, while the directors attempt a detached and neutral gaze as outsiders trying to make sense of their experiences of encounters, they have also taken on a reductionist approach that glosses over a rather complex
social reality. For instance, literature on Africans in Guangzhou stresses that there is not a single narrative that can sum up their experiences. Their lives in Guangzhou exhibit multiple trajectories, diverse experiences, and various strategies of place-making. Their inter-racial interaction with Chinese people also demonstrates a level of complexity in which cooperation and friction co-exist. The film collapses this much more dynamic social reality into a singular representation: an impossibility or unwillingness of their encounter. The film exaggerates their differences instead of acknowledging any of their shared experiences.

Moreover, the directors also abstract and essentialize the woman from Africa and the Chinese working class. Africans who go to Guangzhou come from a wide range of countries in Africa and for different purposes. Chinese people in Guangzhou are also composed of diverse populations, of which a large number are internal migrants rather than locals. They experience similar conditions of transience and precarity as international migrants. The film generalizes these populations and reinforces a binary that portrays their encounters as that between foreigners and locals. All of these issues may be due to the mismatch between what the directors set out to do and what the film accomplishes. While the directors attempted to depict an African’s experience in China and titled the film “An African Walk in the Land of China,” this scope is too large for a dance film of this length to address, which leads to generalizations, stereotyping, and a lack of specificity. This attempt is associated with a persistent colonial gaze on ethnic figures who are fetishized on screen, not accurately represented or understood.

Biography

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Notes

2 Ibid., 13.
3 For example, *Guangzhou Dream Factory* (2017) is a recent documentary film about African migrants’ experience in Guangzhou. *When China Met Africa* (2010) is a documentary film that follows the lives of a Chinese road builder in Ethiopia and a trader and a farmer in Zambia.
5 Martin, 178. Martin defines “over-reading” as a method of dance analysis that goes beyond the dance itself and reads the context where the dance takes place. This approach “[reads] through and past the dance to the point where it meets its own exterior or context” (178).
6 IMDb, “An African.”
7 Curious about its meaning, I put this term in the Google search engine. The results pages were inundated with news articles that commented upon Chinese engagement in Africa and African migrants in China. However, few used the term “ChinAfrica,” except for two sources: an article published in *The Economist* in 2007, titled “Laboring in ChinAfrica,” and a monthly magazine called *ChinAfrica*, published by Chinese government-affiliated CHINAFRICA Media and Publishing Ltd in South Africa. This magazine focuses on news and policy analyses regarding China-Africa relations. Published in both English and French, it mainly targets readers from Africa. For more information, see Hanauer and Morris, 76.
9 Bodomo, 13.
11 French, *China’s Second Continent*, 12.
12 See King, *China’s Aid and Soft Power in Africa*.
13 Li, 8.
18 Brannigan, *Dancefilm*, 43-44.

20 Yang, 154.

21 Castillo, 287.

22 Yang, 154.


24 Ibid.

25 Wilczak, “‘Clean, Safe, and Orderly,’” 73.

26 See Huyn; Yang; Müller and Wehrhahn, “Transnational Business Networks”; and Lan, “Transnational Business and Family Strategies.”


28 Castillo, 288.

29 This inference is made based on my consultation with Al Roberts and Polly Roberts, scholars who study visual arts and cultures in African countries, regarding this costume.

30 Zhou et al., “Entrepreneurship and Interracial Dynamics,” 1573. See also Bodomo.

31 Castillo, 291.

32 Ibid., 291.

33 Zhou et al., 1571.

34 Metzger, Chinese Looks, 142.

35 Zhou et al., 1581.

36 Ibid.

37 Bodomo, 43-44.

38 Yang, 168. See also Castillo, 294.

References


