

Book Review

Bao, Hongwei, and Daniel H. Mutibwa, eds. *Entanglements and Ambivalences: Africa and China Encounters in Media and Culture*. India: Routledge, 2025, 286 pp., ISBN 9781032948362.

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Against the backdrop of the profound reorganization of the global power structure in the 21st century, the interaction between Africa and China has increasingly become a focal point in the study of international relations. While mainstream narratives often confine themselves to frameworks of economic cooperation and geopolitical competition, the neglect of the cultural dimension has led to an oversimplified understanding of China-Africa relations. The publication of *Entanglements and Ambivalences: Africa and China Encounters in Media and Culture* is a timely and valuable addition to these pluralistic perspectives. By bringing together scholars from across disciplines and geographies, the book adopts the Global South as a critical lens and refracts the complex spectrum of China-Africa relations through the prism of cultural production. As a scholarly work exhibiting both theoretical depth and practical relevance, it elucidates the cultural and political logic of dynamic negotiation within the Global South, employing the conceptual framework of “Entanglements” and “Ambivalences.”

1 The Global South: From Conceptual Category to Analytical Framework

This book effectively transforms the Global South from a geographical concept into a critical analytical framework. At the outset, the editors emphasize that the specificity of China-Africa relations lies in their shared colonial history and postcolonial identities, which form the emotional and historical foundation of their dialogue. However, this “Southern solidarity” is not presented as a naturally homogenous alliance, but rather as a dynamic process characterized by tension and negotiation. For example, the book highlights that the “re-imagining” of the Asian-African revolutionary discourse is not a mere historical reproduction. Instead, it is presented as a “counter-hegemonic aesthetics” that transcends national boundaries through the

appropriation and reconstruction of artistic symbols. This perspective challenges the “center-periphery” dichotomy prevalent in traditional international relations research and situates China-Africa interactions within the dialectical field of decolonization and recolonization.

The book avoids romanticizing the “Global South” as a homogenous camp solely focused on resistance to the West. Instead, it reveals internal contradictions through specific case studies. For instance, Emeka Umejei’s analysis of social media discourse demonstrates both critical engagement with external economic partnerships and a re-evaluation of dominant global narratives (Umejei 2025).

2 Cultural Practices: From Politics of Representation to Infrastructural Critique

The structure of this book insightfully reflects the understanding that culture functions both as a vehicle for representation and as a material basis for power relations between China and Africa. The first section focuses on the practices of literature, art, and translation, revealing the power dynamics inherent in the politics of representation. A study on the reinterpretation of African art within the Chinese context observes that Chinese engagements with “Africanness” challenge conventional Western art historical paradigms while simultaneously fostering a critical dialogue on cross-cultural representation. This duality is also evident in Xiangzhen He’s analysis of Chinese literary translation (He 2025).

The second section shifts its focus to an analysis of digital technology as a medium, expanding cultural studies to infrastructural dimensions. Daniel H. Mutibwa’s examination of digital economy initiatives underscores that China’s development of digital infrastructure serves not only as a form of technological collaboration but also as a conduit for cross-cultural exchange. These digital infrastructure initiatives provide new platforms for localized cultural production in Africa, while simultaneously presenting both opportunities and challenges concerning data governance and cultural diversity (Mutibwa 2025).

Further extending this analysis, Heshen Xie’s study of the Kool Kids Film Festival Coalition explores how transnational cultural networks reshape traditional frameworks of engagement. Their research illustrates how collaborative projects challenge conventional assumptions about cultural divides and foster dialogue on shared values. Significantly, the study underscores the importance of contextualizing gender norms within the diverse socio-political landscapes of the Global South. This shift from representational to infrastructural perspectives offers a robust framework for examining the multifaceted dynamics of China-Africa relations (Xie 2025).

3 Ambivalent Narratives: Beyond Romanticization and Demonization

This book transcends simplistic binary thinking by employing a dialectical narrative of “symbiosis” and “contradiction.” It refrains from viewing ambivalence as a rupture in relationships, but rather as an essential aspect in the formation of subjectivity within the Global South. Drawing on Russell West-Pavlov’s reading of *The Dragonfly Sea*, the book suggests that the “instrumentalization” and “recontextualization” of historical memory in Africa have consistently existed in tandem, and this inherent tension fuels cultural innovation. In this sense, “contradiction” is no longer perceived as a negative element to be eliminated, but as a catalyst for creative transformation arising from the intersection of multiple modernities (West-Pavlov 2025).

This book stands as a highly significant contribution, marking a paradigm shift in China-Africa studies from a primary focus on geo-economics to cultural politics. By examining media and culture as arenas of power dynamics, it not only deepens our understanding of China-Africa relations but also represents a crucial step in the theoretical development of the Global South concept.

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