

Haiting Yuan, *The Lucky Man Bar*. Lusaka: University of Zambia Press (hb US\$9.99 – 978 0 9820 3129 5). 2022, 324 pp.

On 19 August 2023, Mo Yan (real name: Guan Moye), the eminent Chinese writer and first Chinese Nobel Prize winner for literature, was reported in *Xinhuanet* to have counselled the Chinese population to get to know Africa more as their knowledge of the continent was minimal. Little did he know that a small group of Chinese artists had already taken the initiative. One of them is Haiting Yuan, a writer whose pioneering work has represented Africa as it is: its beauties, bounties and badness. Yuan's debut, *The Lucky Man Bar*, suggests that after over three millennia of interacting on other fronts, the Chinese have only recently begun to incorporate Africa into their literary imaginary.

Divided into five long chapters, *The Lucky Man Bar* is set mainly in Zambia and, to a lesser extent, Nepal. It captures the experiences of Urkha Loo, a Chinese migrant in Zambia, whose self-christened first name comes from the Nepalese myth of the Gurkha soldiers, who are noted for their bravery and single-mindedness. Loo works for a multinational Chinese company building a hydroelectric power station in Zambia, allowing him to peripatetically bestride two continents.

The first chapter begins in Zambia, with the loss of Urkha's freshly recruited driver, Duke, on the day he received his first pay cheque. Urkha is then introduced to the eponymous Lucky Man Bar, located opposite his recruitment office in Kafue town, as well as the bar's owner, Philip Mwape, a local Zambian, and his only daughter, Elena. Chapter 2 opens with a kind gesture from Urkha, who brings food to his new driver Elvis (Duke's replacement) from a party organized by his business partner. At the party, he asks Augustine, a University of Zambia undergraduate artist, for a portrait, but the young artist goes into a coma before finishing the final strokes. Elena, his course mate, is distraught, as is Urkha, who commiserates with Augustine's mother, sending her money. Elena later dies of suspected suicide, having contracted HIV and AIDS and having had difficulties breaking free from alcohol addiction. Urkha is emotionally shattered by these events, and he hurriedly takes time off for a holiday in China. In Chapter 3, we learn that William, the second owner of the Lucky Man Bar, and his lover and partner Sophie are involved in ivory smuggling. Chapter 4 ends with William's bar being raided by the police on suspicion that he is engaged in the ivory trade. In the meantime, Urkha visits Victoria Falls, where he meets Mansu Tsui, a former undergraduate classmate. Here, he opens up about his past failed love life. On his return to the bar in Kafue, a frightening scenario plays out, as the police take over the bar and ask William to turn himself in. In a flash, William takes Urkha hostage and commands Elvis to help him escape. This is more than Urkha can bear; he takes another holiday, travelling to China and Nepal. In Chapter 5, we find that the holiday relinks him to a despised love interest, Gita, in Nepal. This is the most disconcerting event for Urkha, marking the novel clearly as an emotional tragedy in which a man, sufficiently eligible to be a leader and companion, is nevertheless conceited, without regard for the pure devotion of the women who love him. When he finally comes around, he finds that Gita has been taken.

In an era marked by growing Chinese interest in Africa and its attendant controversies, Haiting Yuan's work unveils various issues significant to our

understanding of contemporary Africa–China relations. From the literary perspective, it lays the foundation for the beginning of Chinese literature about Africa. It is true that Ufrieda Ho's memoir *Paper Sons and Daughters: growing up Chinese in South Africa* (2011), published almost forty years after the appearance of Dennis Brutus's *China Poems* (1975) and some three years after Bofane's *Congo Inc.* (2014), is an important work by a Chinese immigrant, who relates his experiences living in Africa. However, none of these works disclose the significance of the continent to global prosperity in the way that Yuan's *The Lucky Man Bar* does, as the first Chinese literary work on Africa. The novel also displays a unique attitude towards Chinese migration, highlighting harmony with the peoples of Africa, with whom interactions are based not on skin colour but on mutual respect, mutual assistance and cooperativeness. Additionally, *The Lucky Man Bar* touts China's development efforts on the continent. The power station being built by Urkha's company is a critical piece of infrastructure that Zambia greatly needs and is the reason why Urkha is in Africa in the first place. Importantly, we notice that the smuggling of Africa's rare resources is instigated by a set of complex socio-political, ethnic, economic and trans-border factors and the trade in illicit goods such as ivory is not waning, despite efforts at curbing it. In a single breath, Yuan's work counsels African governments and the international community to tackle the menace of smuggling from multiple angles, not the legal front alone.

In spite of a few typographic errors and some inconsistency between American and British English, Yuan's text is a tribute to the contemporary Sino-African relationship. I recommend it highly not only to literary scholars, political scientists and sociologists, but also to all Africanists and anyone desiring to know more about the burgeoning Afro-Chinese cultural interface.

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doi:[10.1017/S0001972024000342](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000342)