



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Afro-Asian resonances: Staging the Congo Crisis in 1960s' Chinese theatre

Yucong Hao 

The Global China Studies Program, New York University Shanghai, Shanghai, China  
Email: [yhao.th@gmail.com](mailto:yhao.th@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

In the first half of the 1960s China witnessed an unprecedented florescence of theatrical works on Third World decolonization, which aimed to disseminate the ideology of Maoist internationalism and cultivate transnational and interracial solidarity among the Chinese public. Existing scholarship on Maoist internationalist theatre tends to understand the phenomenon as the domestication of Third World decolonization for China's political ends. This article, by focusing on the heterogeneous processes of production, adaptation, and reception, illuminates the practical and epistemological challenges of representing an internationalist subject, the imperfect performance of foreign culture and history, and the porous process of meaning-making for Chinese performers and audiences. Using previously untapped historical materials, such as performance programmes, personal recollections, and newspapers, this article explores the staging of the Congo Crisis (1960–1965)—a widely mediated international event in Maoist China and a central conflict in the global Cold War—in the spoken drama *War Drums on the Equator* (1965), its many local variations, and a dance drama adaptation, *The Raging Congo River* (1965). By mediating and enacting 'embodied and affective knowledge' about Congo, these theatrical works made the political motif of internationalist solidarity into sonorous and kinaesthetic artefacts that engendered plural meanings to Chinese performers and audiences. This article further reveals flawed perceptions, processes of corrections, and the epistemological limitations in the performance of the Congo Crisis in Maoist China.

**Keywords:** Internationalism; China; socialist theatre; performance; Afro-Asianism

## Introduction

On 17 July 1965, *Ode to Storm and Thunder* (*Fenglei song*) premiered at the Tianqiao Theatre in Beijing. Produced by the Hunan Folk Song and Dance Ensemble (Hunansheng minjian gewutuan), the musical re-enacts anti-imperialist struggles in countries across Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Each of the ten acts features an international event in the global 1960s—from the Anpo protest in Japan, the Vietnam War, to the Congo Crisis and the Dominican Civil War. The staging of the non-Western world in Chinese theatre, a tradition that goes back to the turn of the twentieth century,

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encapsulates a persistent desire on the part of Chinese artists and intellectuals to envisage ‘a shared contemporary moment of historical crisis and change’.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, unlike the late Qing precedents that combined foreign-style costumes and Chinese traditional dramatic form, the aesthetic language of *Ode to Storm and Thunder* reflected the cultural reorientation of China inaugurated by the Bandung Conference in 1955, when national styles from Asia, Africa, and Latin America were studied and performed as a gesture of solidarity and mutual respect.<sup>2</sup> While the production team borrowed some musical and choreographic vocabulary from these countries, they also appropriated a number of expressions to accentuate the poignant message of anti-imperialism. For instance, Vietnamese bamboo dance, now mingled with Chinese military dance, turned a bamboo prop into a fighting spear against American enemies; when representing the Congo Crisis, the musical transformed African drums into strident war drums to embody the defiant, anti-imperialist spirit of the Congolese.

In published reviews on *Ode to Storm and Thunder*, critics enthusiastically praised the versatile performance of the Third World, lauding the ingenious synthesis of music, dance, and stagecraft that turned the political lesson of internationalist solidarity into graphic images and memorable sounds.<sup>3</sup> To audiences today, the musical’s touristic display of national cultures could easily draw criticisms of impressionistic essentialization, ethnic impersonation, and the purposive appropriation of foreign cultures for China’s own political interests. The dissonance between the two views—between the unreserved celebration of Third World solidarity and a critical reading of Orientalism and hegemonism—is indicative of the changing cultural politics as well as geopolitics of China’s relations to the Third World. Today the radical vision of Maoist internationalism in the socialist era has been subsumed by emerging concerns over Chinese expansionism.<sup>4</sup>

If we interpret theatrical works such as *Ode to Storm and Thunder* solely through the lens of political utilitarianism, then we may dismiss these artworks as merely

<sup>1</sup>Rebecca Karl, *Staging the world: Chinese nationalism at the turn of the twentieth century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 29.

<sup>2</sup>Emily Wilcox, ‘Performing Bandung: China’s dance diplomacy with India, Indonesia, and Burma, 1953–1962’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4 (2017), p. 531.

<sup>3</sup>Wan Weizhou, ‘Gesheng wuzi song fenglei [Celebrating storm and thunder through music and dance]’, *Renmin ribao*, 28 July 1965; ‘Shengli de ge, zhandou de wu [Victorious music, fighting dance]’, *Guangming ribao*, 20 July 1965.

<sup>4</sup>Maoist internationalism, as Emily Wilcox incisively points out, is closely intertwined with the political project of post-colonialism. Wilcox’s discovery of the post-colonial investment of Chinese socialism and Maoist internationalism helps us revisit the critical historical juncture initiated by the Bandung Conference, when socialist China started to engage closely with the decolonizing politics of Asian, African, and Latin American countries and cultivated a Third World consciousness in its political and cultural imagination of a post-colonial future. See Emily Wilcox, ‘The postcolonial blind spot: Chinese dance in the era of Third Worldism, 1949–1965’, *positions: asia critique*, vol. 26, no. 4 (2018), pp. 781–815. Since 2013, when China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that pursued economic cooperation, and its expanded political influence in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, the BRI has become a primary framework of understanding China’s relations with the Global South. See, for instance, Xiaoyue Li, ‘China–Egypt relations: Constructing images and perceptions in the Belt and Road Initiative’, in *Rethinking China, the Middle East and Asia in a ‘multiplex world’*, (eds) Mojtava Mahdavi and Tugrul Keskin (Leiden: Brill, 2022), pp. 147–161.

instruments that promulgated the state ideology of Maoist internationalism. This article advocates for the necessity of attending to the form and performance of Third World solidarity and historicizing the evolution of this distinctive theatrical vocabulary. This approach allows us to grasp the intricate negotiation between political directives and aesthetic designs, and brings to light the multifarious processes of the production, revision, and reception that concretized solidarity as a historical, lived experience.

Scholars of Chinese socialist culture have variously noted that artworks with Third World subjects proliferated in almost all fields of culture in the Bandung era, which contributed to an internationalist cultural ecology.<sup>5</sup> If we position *Ode to Storm and Thunder* within this burgeoning aesthetic of internationalism, we start to recognize how the musical, functioning as a massive theatrical database, indexed international themes, revolutionary tropes, and foreign national styles that were actively incorporated and appropriated in Chinese cultural production in this period. With its comprehensive coverage of international events and diversity of theatrical lexicon, *Ode to Storm and Thunder* offers us an excellent opportunity to observe the evolution and consolidation of aesthetic conventions in representing the Third World in Maoist China. The use of a bamboo spear to symbolize a fighting Vietnam, for instance, was popularized by *Letters from the South* (*Nanfang laixi*, 1963), an epistolary fiction that was subsequently adapted into cinema and theatre; the representation of the Congolese decolonization movement through passionate drum dance<sup>6</sup> originated from *War Drums on the Equator* (*Chidao zhangu*, 1965), the first Chinese spoken drama on Africa. In this light, the performance of the Third World in *Ode to Storm and Thunder*, far from being impressionistic improvisation, was moulded by complex processes of transmedia adaptation and formal citations over time, and the musical further helped to solidify this expressive vocabulary.

In existing literature on Maoist internationalist theatre, there are two representative narratives that reckon with this emerging repertoire of internationalism. The concept of domestic internationalism, formulated by Christopher Tang, posits that these internationalist artworks brought to the Chinese cultural scene 'long cherished notions about Third World revolution, decolonization, race, postcolonial development, and modernization'.<sup>7</sup> The domestic circulation of foreign stories not only disseminated to Chinese audiences essential political knowledge about the decolonizing history of the Third World, but also helped them to develop a sense of temporal simultaneity and spatial situatedness within a global revolutionary community. Yet this practice

<sup>5</sup>See Tina Mai Chen, 'Socialism, aestheticized bodies, and international circuits of gender: Soviet female film stars in the People's Republic of China, 1949–1969', *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2008), pp. 53–80; Benjamin Kindler, 'Our friends in the South: Anti-colonial universalisms and Sino-Vietnamese solidarity in the global 1960s', *International Quarterly for Asian Studies*, vol. 52, no. 3–4 (2021), pp. 207–227; Nicolai Volland, *Socialist cosmopolitanism: The Chinese literary universe, 1945–1965* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Emily Wilcox, *Revolutionary bodies: Chinese dance and the socialist legacy* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019); and Ban Wang, *China in the world: Culture, politics, and world vision* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

<sup>6</sup>drum dance refers to African dance accompanied by the rhythmic beats of drums.

<sup>7</sup>Christopher Tang, 'Homeland in the heart, eyes on the world: Domestic internationalism, popular mobilization, and the making of China's Cultural Revolution, 1962–68', PhD thesis, Cornell University, 2016, p. 15.

could also induce revolutionary narcissism that masked a Sinocentric nationalism.<sup>8</sup> A second narrative, exemplified by Xiaomei Chen's study of socialist theatre, considers that the subject of war and revolution re-enacted on the Maoist stage was intended to perpetuate continuous revolutions against feudalism, revisionism, and imperialism. The proliferation of military stories, therefore, became 'indispensable for winning the Chinese revolution in the past and for the triumph of the world revolution in the present'.<sup>9</sup> Both domestic internationalism and continuous revolution, I contend, underscore the alleged intent of domesticating Third World decolonization for Chinese audiences, either as a way of valorizing Chinese revolutionary experiences for world revolution, or of continuing revolution in a barely post-revolutionary society. Yet from a top-down perspective that neatly matches cultural production with political directives or foreign policies, these interpretations belie a tendency to expose the orchestrated nature—therefore, inauthenticity—of the Chinese vision of Third World solidarity.

This article, shifting away from scrutinizing political orchestration, traces the actual performance of the Third World in Maoist theatre. Specifically, I examine the staging of the Congo Crisis (1960–1965), a widely mediated international event in Maoist China and a central conflict in the global Cold War, in the spoken drama *War Drums on the Equator* (1965) and its many local variations, and a subsequent dance drama adaptation *The Raging Congo River* (*Gangguohe zai nuhou*, 1965). I bring to light audiovisual-kinaesthetic techniques, participatory engagement, and constant trial and error that was part of the staging of Afro-Asian solidarity, which not only shaped aesthetic conventions of performing Congo but helped to concretize the idea of solidarity as sensuous artefacts, or even affective apparatus, to evoke visceral responses from Chinese performers and audiences. In addition to acknowledging the enormous labour and daring creativity required, I also consider the flawed perceptions, processes of correction, and epistemological limitations that took place in the process of mediating and enacting a foreign society that was largely unknown to Chinese performers and audiences. While these instances reveal the imperfections in the Chinese vision of solidarity, they simultaneously thickened solidarity as a historical experience of constant interaction, revision, and transformation.<sup>10</sup> In the following sections, I first examine the epistemological and practical challenges in representing decolonizing Congo in *War Drums on the Equator*, then trace the laborious practices and material engagements when performing 'blackness' in both the spoken drama and its many local variations. I conclude my discussion by considering how the staging of the Congo Crisis helped to break new ground in Chinese performance culture through the case study of *The Raging Congo River*.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>9</sup>Xiaomei Chen, 'Remembering war and revolution on the Maoist stage', in *Cold War literature: Writing the global conflict*, (ed.) Andrew Hammond (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 132.

<sup>10</sup>Madhumita Lahiri helpfully reminds us of the necessity of acknowledging the imperfection of solidarity. Despite its limited perceptions, flawed connections, and ephemerality, such imperfect solidarity was still capable of galvanizing transformative potential; see M. Lahiri, *Imperfect solidarities: Tagore, Gandhi, Du Bois, and the forging of the global Anglophone* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2021), p. 15.

### The dilemma of 'going into life'

Collectively written and produced by the Drama Troupe of the Naval Political Department of the People's Liberation Army (Haizheng huajutuan, hereafter Haizheng), *War Drums on the Equator* revolves around the Congo Crisis (1960–1965), a proxy conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union for control of the recently independent Congo.<sup>11</sup> The Chinese spoken drama, rather than delving into an analysis of Cold War geopolitics, narrates the anti-American imperialist struggles of the Congolese people: the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the leader of Congo's decolonizing movement, awakens the entire population and mobilizes them to resist American interventions in Congo.<sup>12</sup> After its premiere in Beijing in February 1965, *War Drums on the Equator* toured the country and was regularly staged for domestic audiences between 1965 and 1966. It further served as a major diplomatic venue to entertain foreign visitors to China.<sup>13</sup> When Lumumba's widow arrived in China in June 1965, she arranged to watch the show, to which she responded warmly and expressed gratitude for Chinese support for Congolese decolonization.<sup>14</sup>

Although China's military involvement in the Congo Crisis was tangential, the show served as a 'symbolic struggle' for China in the global Cold War, channelling China's own ideological anxiety and geopolitical precarity.<sup>15</sup> As a result, the Congo Crisis, especially the murder of Patrice Lumumba on 17 January 1961, received extensive media coverage and aroused a nationwide response in China. State newspapers closely followed military conflicts in Congo, and published statements condemning American imperialist brutality. The visibility of the Congo Crisis was further enhanced by representations of Lumumba's revolutionary heroism across various mass-oriented media, including popular songs, poems, cartoons, and woodblock prints. Unlike sentiments of defeat, pessimism, and despair that haunted the black community in the 1960s,

<sup>11</sup>Jonathan Cole, 'The Congo question: Conflicting visions of independence', *Emporia State Research Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2006), p. 35.

<sup>12</sup>Reference to the Soviet Union, however, was curiously missing in the spoken drama. Thus, as with many other internationalist artworks in China in the period, it presents a simplified storyline in which people of the Third World collectively resist American imperialism.

<sup>13</sup>*War Drums on the Equator* was not shown outside China, and never reached the Congolese public. The sentiment of solidarity was largely unilateral, of Chinese performers and audiences empathizing with the cause of Congolese decolonization. In the *People's Daily*, there were multiple news reports between 1965 and 1966 about foreign ambassadors, political leaders, and cultural and political delegates being invited to see the play. When Beijing held the Emergency Session of the Afro-Asian Writers Conference in 1966, Third World writers also went to watch the show. As the responses of foreign audiences were recorded by and filtered through Chinese state media, the opinions were unanimously positive, celebrating the internationalist, transracial solidarity between China and Congo. See Langge, 'Wo sancan kan *Chidao zhangu* [I watched *War Drums on the Equator* three times]', *Renmin ribao*, 23 April 1965; and 'Ya Fei zuojia guankan *Chidao zhangu* [Afro-Asian writers watched *War Drums on the Equator*]', *Renmin ribao*, 4 July 1965. One exception was a reflection produced by the British playwright Robert Bolt, in which he criticized the play's self-righteous political position and flattened characterization. See Robert Bolt, 'Theatre in China in 1965', in *African theatre 15: China, India, and the Eastern world*, (eds) Martin Banham et al. (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2016), p. 69.

<sup>14</sup>Lumumba furen zai Shanghai kan huaju *Chidao zhangu* [Madame Lumumba watched *War Drums on the Equator* in Shanghai], *Renmin ribao*, 27 June 1965.

<sup>15</sup>Alexander Cook, 'Chinese Uhuru: Maoism and the Congo Crisis', *positions: asia critique*, vol. 27, no. 4 (2019), pp. 570–571.

which was most elaborately expressed in Aimé Césaire's *A Season in the Congo* (1966),<sup>16</sup> Chinese representation tended to portray the Congo Crisis through the mirror image of China's triumphant experience of national revolutions. With much optimism, these artworks glorified the heroic martyrdom of Lumumba and boldly envisioned Congo's post-colonial future.<sup>17</sup>

Poems and visual arts usually captured the most poignant moments of the Congo Crisis, which, in many cases, was the martyr's death of Lumumba. As a seven-act spoken drama, *War Drums on the Equator*, however, had to produce a narrative with a complex plot and diverse characters and show the progression of historical time and revolutionary consciousness. Thus, the art form of spoken drama demanded that the production team at Haizheng should have a much more thorough understanding of Congolese history, politics, and culture than mere simple reiterations of anti-imperialist slogans.

In the cultural scene in the 1960s, although the political directives of Maoist internationalism served as an impetus to represent the Third World, in the actual process of creation, there was another important principle that guided theatrical production: 'going into life' (*shenru shenghuo*) so as to directly and deeply experience the life of the subject to be represented. Originating in Yan'an in the late 1930s, going into life became a staple practice in leftist cultural production after Mao's Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Art and Literature in 1942. An artist, according to Mao, is expected to delve deep into the lives of their intended subjects—workers, peasants, and soldiers—to really get to know them. Only after a significant period of working and living with them could the artist collect sufficient material based on their lives, acquire a proletarian consciousness, and represent faithfully the essence of reality.<sup>18</sup>

As literary historian Cheng Kai notes, with the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the method of going into life underwent much transformation: an artist could now go into life through institutionalized fieldwork; they were also expected to develop appropriate artistic techniques to process, refine, and sublimate life experiences into meaningful artworks.<sup>19</sup> In her illuminating study of Chinese dancers' fieldwork in the socialist era, Emily Wilcox further unravels the centrality of bodily experience (*tiyan*) in successfully going into life. Bodily experience, which encompasses activities involving bodily contact, physical displacement, and mediation of embodied techniques, requires dancers to encounter life not simply as astute observers, rather their kinaesthetic engagement with life is indispensable to representing fully the texture and depth of life.<sup>20</sup> If the original formulation in 1942 stresses that the purpose

<sup>16</sup>Sara Kendall, 'Postcolonial hauntings and Cold War continuities: Congolese sovereignty and the murder of Patrice Lumumba', in *International law and the Cold War*, (eds) Matthew Craven, Sundhya Pahuja and Gerry Simpson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 533–558.

<sup>17</sup>See Ding Hanjia, 'Lumengba, ta hai huozhe [Lumumba, he is still alive]', *Yuhua*, no. 2–3 (1961), p. 17; and Yuan Ying, 'Chuntian de zongzi [Seeds of spring]', *Shijie wenxue*, no. 2 (1961), pp. 112–115.

<sup>18</sup>Mao Zedong, *Talks at the Yan'an Conference on literature and art: A translation of the 1943 text with commentary*, (trans.) Bonnie S. McDougall (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980).

<sup>19</sup>Cheng Kai, 'Shenru shenghuo de nanti [The challenge of going into life]', *Zhongguo xiandai wenxue yanjiu congkan*, no. 2 (2020), p. 10.

<sup>20</sup>Emily Wilcox, 'Dancers doing fieldwork: Socialist aesthetics and bodily experience in the People's Republic of China', *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement*, vol. 17, no. 2 (2012), <https://jashm.press.uillinois.edu/17.2/wilcox.html>, [accessed 12 June 2012].

of going into life was to adopt an ideologically correct position and represent the masses faithfully, with the institutionalization of fieldwork in Maoist China, going into life now required the refinement of artistic techniques and attainment of embodied experiences.

To theatre professionals who were commissioned to work on a foreign subject in the 1960s, several questions inevitably surfaced. When it came to representing the lives of those in the decolonization movement in Congo, rather than Chinese proletariats, how could they fulfil the renewed requirements of going into life? How could Chinese artists, most of whom had never set foot in Africa or lived with Congolese people, enact and represent the fullness of revolutionary life in that remote country? What kind of aesthetic techniques should they deploy, and what kind of responses—ideological, sensorial, or affective—should such a representation of Congolese life evoke from audiences? These were the technical and epistemological challenges that the production team of *War Drums on the Equator* had to grapple with.

Recollecting the process of production, the director, Zhang Fengyi, confessed the profound anxiety shared by his colleagues: ‘This is a very important international subject. [However,] we did not have any experience of production, nor possessed any embodied and affective knowledge (*ganxing zhishi*) of African and Congolese struggles’ (emphasis mine).<sup>21</sup> Their exposure to Congo, in fact, was no more than an open statement Mao issued in 1964 that supported the independence of Congo and a mass rally against American interventions in Congo that they had attended in Shanghai. In other words, regarding the requirements of going into life, though the production team had no issue in subscribing to the ‘correct’ political position, they were very concerned about not possessing sufficient knowledge to represent decolonizing life in Congo.

Director Zhang specifically pinpointed that their lack of embodied and affective knowledge, a form of knowledge that was conventionally acquired through embodied practices of going into life, constituted a major obstacle in the production process. Unlike political doctrines that belong to the realm of rational knowledge (*lixing zhishi*), embodied and affective knowledge underscores the pivotal role of human sensorium in feeling and mediating knowledge, an embodied practice that one navigates in a ‘world of materials’.<sup>22</sup> The production team’s valorization of embodied and affective knowledge reveals how they made the theatrical effects of the spoken drama their core consideration, for the efficacy of the expression of Sino-Congolese solidarity was determined by the extent to which the spoken drama could evoke visceral responses from the audience, reverberate in their senses, and inspire revolutionary passions from them. As I trace the history of the production of *War Drums on the Equator*, we can see how the group of theatre professionals, in an effort to resolve the dilemma of going into life—or, to compensate for their lack of embodied experiences, strove to (re-)construct

<sup>21</sup>Zhang Fengyi, ‘Chidao zhangu de dansheng [The birth of *War Drums on the Equator*]’, *Zhongguo xiju*, no. 4 (1965), p. 19.

<sup>22</sup>In the technological realm, as Jamie Monson demonstrates in her fascinating account of technology transfer during the construction of the TAZARA Railway, embodied practice was widely used by Chinese technicians as an effective mode of knowledge transmission. See Jamie Monson, ‘Learning by heart: Training for self-reliance on the TAZARA Railway, 1968–1976’, *Made in China*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2021), pp. 95–103.

embodied and affective knowledge through audiovisual aesthetics and kinaesthetic techniques that could substantially represent Congolese life with sensorial fullness.

### Producing embodied and affective knowledge onstage

Even at the early stage of preparing the playscript, the production team of Haizheng was already aware that the spoken drama, rather than circulating textually as drama literature, was to be performed onstage as a sensuous spectacle that would resonate deeply in the hearts and minds of audiences. When the playscript was first drafted, it was entitled 'Raging Flame on the Equator' (*Chidao liehuo*).<sup>23</sup> Although flame, an oft-deployed trope in Chinese socialist arts, figuratively captured the dynamism of the decolonization movement, it failed to convey any socio-cultural or sensorial specificities of decolonizing Congo. After a round of research on African culture and interviews with Africans in China, the team eventually decided to feature drum and dance in the spoken drama.<sup>24</sup> These two elements, central to Congolese culture, also found their translingual resonance in Chinese: drum (*gu*) and dance (*wu*), when combined together, became *guwu*, coinciding with a Chinese word meaning 'to agitate and inspire'.<sup>25</sup>

In the final version of the playscript, now renamed to *War Drums on the Equator*, we can see how the expressive capacity of drum and dance—the sonic and the kinaesthetic—was meticulously explored. This became the most prominent form of embodied and affective knowledge exhibited in the spoken drama. In the dramatic text, there are self-conscious engagements with sensory expressions, ranging from literary imageries of storm and thunder to stage directives about drum performance and dance. The cues of audiovisual expressions and kinaesthetic movements make the playscript a production manual, with instructions on stage props, sound effects, and dance and performance.

The production team envisioned *War Drums on the Equator* to be a 'march of splendid revolutionary struggles' (*bolanzhuangkuo de geming jinxingqu*).<sup>26</sup> The reference to march music is both metaphorical and literal. On the one hand, this analogy reveals the intended effect that the spoken drama aspired to accomplish: to embody a militant spirit and effectively agitate the audience. To that end, they borrowed extensively from other expressive mediums, such as poetry recitation and choral singing, to amplify affective expressivity and calibrate revolutionary sensorium. The play, for instance, begins with a prologue that re-enacts the monumental moment of the national independence of Congo from Belgian colonialism in 1960:

Today  
A thunderstorm lashes the Atlantic  
And the clarion call of our age reverberates above Black Africa:  
'Arise, you prisoners of starvation!'

<sup>23</sup>Che Wenyi, 'Chidao zhangu shi zenyang dansheng de [How we made *War Drums on the Equator*]', in *Wenyi ziliao huibian* [Collection of materials on literature and art], (ed.) Henan sheng wenxue yishu jie lianhehui (unpublished, 1965), p. 133.

<sup>24</sup>Zhang Fengyi, 'Chidao zhangu daoyan zhaji [Director's notes on *War Drum on the Equator*]', *Wenhui bao*, 23 July 1965.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

'Arise, you who refuse to be slaves!  
 Black Africa is awakened!  
 The Congo is awakened!<sup>27</sup>

Actors performed the prologue in group recitation, a practice that was widely deployed in political campaigns at the time.<sup>28</sup> In addition to literary tropes of sound, the prologue further introduces two vehement calls: 'Arise, you prisoners of starvation!' and 'Arise, you who refuse to be slaves!'. Taken from 'Internationale' and the Chinese national anthem respectively, arguably the most politically poignant music in modern China, the cries seek to evoke simultaneous emotions of Chinese nationalism and transnational solidarity to forge a meaningful connection between China's national past and an internationalist future. Formally, the textual design to draw references from music amplifies the aurality of the script, thus foregrounding recitation as the most appropriate medium to sonify such revolutionary passion. In this way, the prologue becomes what Charles Bernstein calls an 'audiotext'—one with built-in awareness of performance that manifests its acoustic expressivity through the very performance of it.<sup>29</sup>

The connection between the spoken drama and march music, on the other hand, is quite literal. Featuring strident drumbeats characteristic of march music, *War Drums on the Equator* had drum performance as its core audiovisual expression. In fact, almost every act of the play uses African drum dance and music, an unusual experiment in the history of spoken drama in modern China.<sup>30</sup> The extensive deployment of drum dance, while providing the audience with an immense theatrical attraction, posed great challenges for the actors. Wei Liangyan, who played the role of a Congolese revolutionary, recalled that he found it extremely difficult to speak and perform drum dance at the same time.<sup>31</sup> Although Wei and many of his colleagues framed their experience of learning drum dance as a success story—how, through diligent practice and spiritual empowerment inspired by the thoughts of Mao, they eventually overcame the challenge,<sup>32</sup> the profound anxiety and sense of urgency that they experienced in rehearsals revealed how seriously they took mastering African choreographic techniques. The performance of drum dance was far from an exotic embellishment. On the contrary, it was believed to be an essential, albeit indirect, way for Chinese actors to corporeally experience the sensory abundance of Congolese life.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the actors perceived that the mastery of drum dance—to literally embody the Congolese

<sup>27</sup>Li Huang, *War Drums on the Equator: A play of seven scenes* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), pp. 1–2.

<sup>28</sup>John Crespi, *Voices in revolution: Poetry and the auditory imagination in modern China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), p. 148.

<sup>29</sup>Charles Bernstein, *Close listening: Poetry and the performed word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 22.

<sup>30</sup>Haizheng huajutuan, 'Yong geming wenyi zhiyuan shijie renmin geming douzheng [To support world revolution with revolutionary art]', *Renmin ribao*, 27 October 1965.

<sup>31</sup>Wei Liangyan, 'Juese chuanguzao de qianqian houhou [On the creation of the character]', *Wenhui bao*, 13 July 1965.

<sup>32</sup>Ou Guanyun, 'Gusheng, wuzi, he huazhuang [Drumbeats, dance, and make-up]', *Xinmin wanbao*, 13 July 1965.

<sup>33</sup>Ding Jia, 'Tan Chidao zhangu de chuanguzuo yuanquan [On the origin of the creation of *War Drums on the Equator*]', *Wenhui bao*, 9 August 1965.

characters—was integral to the successful and faithful representation of revolutionary Congo.<sup>34</sup>

The incorporation of Congolese drum dance in *War Drums on the Equator* was in fact made possible by several recent developments in the field of dance in China. As the Bandung Conference opened up China to the vast geography of the Third World, it also introduced to the Maoist stage Third World dance styles as part of the revolutionary repertoire. State-sponsored visits of foreign dancers and the institutional establishment of a non-Western dance curriculum effectively helped to disseminate choreographic expressions from the Third World.<sup>35</sup> Asian dance styles were introduced as early as the mid-1950s,<sup>36</sup> and by 1964, African troupes began to arrive in socialist China.<sup>37</sup> Invited by the Sino-African Friendship Association (Zhong Fei youhao xiehui), a song-and-dance ensemble from Congo-Brazzaville did a three-month tour of China's major cities.<sup>38</sup> During their stay, they connected with the production team of *War Drums on the Equator*. Aside from dance workshops, together they even participated in a mass protest against American imperialism in Congo.<sup>39</sup> While the ensemble's performance of drum dance provided much inspiration and the technical foundations for Haizheng's spoken drama, it should be noted that the programme that they brought to China was much more diverse than militant expressions of decolonization, and included choreographic expressions based on folk life experiences. Yet to Chinese performers and audiences, folk dance was still interpreted through the lens of the racial, class, and anti-imperialist struggle.<sup>40</sup>

Parallel to the visits of foreign artists, the Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble (Dongfang gewutuan, hereafter OSDE), which was established in 1962 under the supervision of Premier Zhou Enlai,<sup>41</sup> served as an important mediator of Third World performance culture in socialist China. By the mid-1960s, African dance was part of OSDE's regular programme, and the ensemble later provided essential support for the training and performance of drum dance in *War Drums on the Equator*.<sup>42</sup> Much more than introducing and instructing Third World dance styles, OSDE further helped to popularize and legitimate the practice of ethnic impersonation in performance. When staging

<sup>34</sup>Wei, 'On the creation of the character'; and Ou, 'Drumbeats, dance, and make-up'.

<sup>35</sup>Wilcox, 'The postcolonial blind spot', p. 801.

<sup>36</sup>Emily Wilcox, 'Performing Bandung: China's dance diplomacy with India, Indonesia, and Burma, 1953–1962', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 4 (2017), p. 533.

<sup>37</sup>Song Tianyi, *Zhong wai biaoyan yishu jiaoliu shi lue 1949–1992* [A brief history of Sino-foreign exchange of performing arts] (Beijing: wenhua yishu chubanshe, 1994), p. 79.

<sup>38</sup>The Diyabuwa (a pinyin transliteration) Ensemble, a group of 21 performers, was led by Diyabuwa, and the ensemble performed in at least five Chinese cities—Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Xi'an, and Changsha—between October 1964 and January 1965. See Wang Kefen and Long Yinpei (eds), *Zhongguo jinxindai wudao fazhan shi 1840–1996* [The history of dance in modern and contemporary China, 1840–1996] (Beijing: renmin yinyue chubanshe, 1999), p. 816; and *Shanghai wenhua nianjian 1991* [A chronicle of culture in Shanghai, 1991] (Beijing: Zhongguo dabaikie qianshu chubanshe, 1991), p. 248.

<sup>39</sup>Che, 'How we made *War Drums on the Equator*', p. 133.

<sup>40</sup>Li Jie, 'Feizhou de zhangu [War drums from Africa]', in *Huaguo de cuoluo* [Crossings between flower and fruit] (Beijing: Zhongguo guangbo dianshi chubanshe, 1990), p. 57.

<sup>41</sup>See Wilcox, 'Performing Bandung', p. 531; and Jiang Dong, *Zhongguo wudao zouguo qishinian* [Chinese dance: a history of seventy years] (Beijing: wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2020), pp. 189–192.

<sup>42</sup>Li Xinzhi and Liu Qing, *Zhou Enlai jishi* [A chronicle of Zhou Enlai] (Beijing: Zhongyang wenxian chubanshe, 2011), p. 755.

foreign ethnic styles, Chinese performers tended to dress in ethnic clothing and make-up to create an effect of visual resemblance, which, as Emily Wilcox helpfully points out, should be understood within the context of Bandung-era cultural exchange as ‘an expression of respect and a medium for cultural understanding’.<sup>43</sup>

The approach that *War Drums on the Equator* adopted to perform Congolese life was indeed one of ethnic impersonation. The actors who played Congolese characters had their faces and bodies painted in black and dressed in costumes in bold colours to resemble the style of Congolese clothing. To viewers today, this practice is deeply problematic and can immediately provoke associations with minstrelsy in Western theatre. However, it is important to situate this within both the realistic tradition of Chinese spoken drama and the cultural practice of Third Worldism cemented by art institutions like OSDE. *War Drums on the Equator*’s use of ethnic impersonation, on the one hand, can be traced back to the staging of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by a group of overseas Chinese students in Japan in 1907, which remained standard in Chinese spoken drama until the end of the Cultural Revolution in the mid-1970s.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, it reflected the popularity of ethnic impersonation in Maoist performance culture in the Bandung era, when authenticity was highly valued by both performers and audiences and regarded as evidence of artistic virtuosity.

In fact, to ensure the achievement of authenticity in their representation of Congolese culture and characters, the production team of Haizheng seized every opportunity to workshop with OSDE and Africans in China so as to elicit suggestions of improvement. One anecdote is that the troupe initially painted the lips of the Congolese characters in bright red, but after they consulted Cameroonian students and learned that this replicated the racist convention of blackface, they immediately changed to black to resemble the natural lip colour of Africans.<sup>45</sup>

In spite of their championing of authenticity, the Haizheng artists (and Chinese performers in general) nevertheless perceived African performance culture as homogenous without differentiating between regional or national styles. When they learned drum performance, the production team ended up incorporating multiple traditions as most of their African tutors and informants were not from Congo.<sup>46</sup> For instance, the spoken drama featured extensive use of drums to communicate revolutionary messages, a tradition that was indebted to the West African culture of the talking drum.<sup>47</sup> Critics and ordinary audiences shared the homogenizing tendency that treated Africa and Congo as interchangeable synonyms. In published reviews of *War Drum on the Equator*, cultural critics enthusiastically praised the fact that the spoken drama authentically brought home the sounds and sights of life in Congo and Africa. *Jiefang Daily* even solicited responses from Chinese technicians who had recently returned from a construction project in Guinea. Even though that country’s culture and history were

<sup>43</sup>Wilcox, ‘Performing Bandung’, p. 533.

<sup>44</sup>Claire Conceison, *Significant other: Staging the American in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), p. 32.

<sup>45</sup>Zhang, ‘The birth of *War Drums on the Equator*’, p. 20.

<sup>46</sup>Che, ‘How we made *War Drums on the Equator*’, pp. 135–136.

<sup>47</sup>Michael J. K. Bokor, ‘When the drum speaks: The rhetoric of motion, emotion, and action in African societies’, *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2014), p. 172.

different from that of Congo, their experiences there lent them the authority to evaluate whether the representation of Congolese life in *War Drums on the Equator* was faithful or not. All of them lauded the impressive degree of authenticity that the spoken drama had exhibited, and one even exclaimed, 'Their performance was so authentic... If I had not been told that the actors were from Haizheng, I may have assumed they were African students studying in China.'<sup>48</sup> These testimonies, though potentially coordinated and exaggerated, illustrated the strenuous labour, both physical and affective, that the production team undertook to re-enact a life that they had never experienced. Yet these remarks also revealed the flawed perception of the Chinese public at the time, when Africa was seen as a monolithic entity.

### Staging blackness in Maoist China

A popular understanding about race in socialist China is the paucity of its representation in the political and cultural imagination—race is either believed to be irrelevant to a raceless society like China or as being subsumed under the fabric of class.<sup>49</sup> Recent scholarship has started to challenge this reductionist understanding by charting China's multifaceted engagements with race in the Maoist era, when race manifested as 'a political weapon in its own right',<sup>50</sup> a shared historical condition of colonial subjugation,<sup>51</sup> and lived experiences of individual encounters.<sup>52</sup> Informed by these insights, in the following section, I examine the staging of the black race—both within the story of *War Drum on the Equator* and across its many local reverberations—to uncover the heterogeneous ways in which interracial solidarity was explored and envisaged in Maoist China.

While *War Drums on the Equator* centres around the resistance of Congolese people, halfway into the play we come across Warren, an African American soldier and victim of racial violence in the United States. Challenged by white soldiers to execute Congolese revolutionary Mwanka to prove his 'allegiance', Warren suddenly turns against them, saves Mwanka, and later joins the anti-imperialist resistance of Congo. While Warren recognizes black brotherhood between him and Mwanka,<sup>53</sup> his Congolese counterpart, replies in language that carefully avoids championing the racial bond as the sole source of solidarity: 'Do you think our struggle today is black men against white men? You are wrong. All the oppressed people in the world,

<sup>48</sup>Chen Wenhan, 'Duome zhenshi de xianchu [What an authentic performance]', *Jiefang ribao*, 7 July 1965.

<sup>49</sup>See Frank Dikötter, *The discourse of race in modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).

<sup>50</sup>Ruodi Duan, 'Solidarity in three acts: Narrating US black freedom movements in China, 1961–66', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 5 (2019), p. 1355.

<sup>51</sup>Vera Leigh Fennell, 'Race: China's question and problem', *The Review of Black Political Economy*, vol. 40, no. 3 (2013), p. 261.

<sup>52</sup>See Jamie Monson, *Africa's freedom railway: How a Chinese development project changed lives and livelihoods in Tanzania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); and Yunxiang Gao, *Arise Africa, roar China: Black and Chinese citizens of the world in the twentieth century* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

<sup>53</sup>Li, *War Drums on the Equator*, p. 42.

regardless of race and color, are brothers. We are out to destroy imperialism and colonialism.<sup>54</sup>

To employ racism to criticize the United States was a common tactic in cultural productions across the socialist bloc, which served the dual purpose of legitimating socialist nation-building and exposing capitalist moral degradation. Yet *War Drums on the Equator* complicated such Cold War binarism by implicitly criticizing black nationalism and the nationalist rhetoric in anti-racist discourses. Through Mwanka's words, the spoken drama privileges a class-based, interracial solidarity as the ultimate antidote to racism. While this understanding echoes Mao's famous proclamation that 'racial struggle is a matter of class struggle' by acknowledging the shared status of subjugation,<sup>55</sup> it usefully links the historical experience of racial oppression with other forms of imperialist or colonial subjugation, thus translating race into a language that was immediately legible and meaningful to Chinese audiences.

Some recent studies on Third Worldism in Maoist China, as Shu-mei Shih observes, have drifted away from the prism of interracial solidarity and come to scrutinize China's political manoeuvring and diplomatic gains during the formation of the Bandung alliance.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, if we examine the formulation of Afro-Asian solidarity from the perspective of China's geopolitical interests, then the history (as well as the spoken drama) is fraught with ironies. The spoken drama's reference to Pierre Mulele, a rebel leader trained in China, manifested China's desire to export Maoist guerrilla warfare globally.<sup>57</sup> The immediate aftermath of the Congo Crisis further emphasized the ephemeral nature of China's commitment to the Congolese decolonization movement: by the early 1970s, China had turned to Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, who had been an ally of the United States a decade earlier, and provided military and financial aid to his regime under the same banner of 'Third World solidarity'.<sup>58</sup>

Such a retrospective reading tempts us to conclude that Afro-Asian solidarity as exhibited in *War Drums on the Equator* was carefully staged political theatre orchestrated by the Chinese state and coordinated by cultural cadres from Haizheng. Here, I find useful the concept of 'thick solidarity', which helps us to perceive Third World solidarity as multi-layered, lived experiences, thus moving beyond persisting binaries of sincerity and falsehood, spontaneity and calculation. In Jamie Monson's studies of Sino-African exchange in the 1960s and 1970s, she underscores the importance of understanding everyday encounters and international connectivity with the Global South, which substantiated Afro-Asian solidarity as lived experiences.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>55</sup>Mao Zedong, 'Statement supporting the American Negroes in their just struggle against racial discrimination by U.S. imperialism', *Peking Review*, vol. 9, no. 33, 12 August 1966, p. 13.

<sup>56</sup>Shumei Shih, 'Race and relation: The global Sixties in the South of the South', *Comparative Literature*, vol. 68, no. 2 (2013), p. 158.

<sup>57</sup>Cook, 'Chinese Uhuru', p. 587

<sup>58</sup>Mengbotuo zongtong he furen dao Jing shoudao relie huanying [President Mobutu and his wife arrived in Beijing and were warmly welcomed], *Renmin ribao*, 17 December 1974.

<sup>59</sup>See Jamie Monson, 'Futures in the past of Africa-China engagement', in *African transformations: Transregional perspectives on development cooperation, social mobility, and cultural change*, (ed.) Ruth Achenbach (Leiden: Brill, 2020), p. 29; and Monson, 'Learning by heart'. This concept of 'thick solidarity', first coined by Roseann Liu and Savannah Shange, underscores 'specificity, irreducibility, and incommensurability of racialized experiences' as the basis of establishing solidarity. See Roseann Liu and Savannah Shange,

Though solidarity, as pursued in the case of *War Drums on the Equator*, was largely imperfect, especially considering the flawed perception, ephemeral nature, and limited international reach of the spoken drama, by tracing the heterogeneous practices of performing and embodying blackness—in particular, in local and even amateur productions—we can grasp the materiality and corporeality of solidarity that thickened the idea of Afro-Asianism for Chinese performers and audiences.

After the premiere of *War Drums on the Equator* in Beijing in February 1965, Haizheng took their production to large cities later that year, which implies that the reach of the spoken drama was still confined to a small group of metropolitan audiences. In fact, the nationwide popularity of *War Drums on the Equator* was largely fuelled by local and even amateur renditions.<sup>60</sup> Unlike Haizheng, a national troupe that enjoyed the privilege of directly learning from OSDE and African informants, many regional troupes, due to their material constraints and limited access to training in drum performance, had to rely on improvisation and local wisdom. As Liu Haiyang, then assistant costume designer at the Tianjin People's Art Theatre, recollected, due to the lack of materials such as paints and dyes, the troupe had to tinker creatively with available resources to apply make-up and design costumes. Due to the dynamic movement of drum dance, black oil paints on the bodies of the actors would be washed away by sweat within a few minutes. Liu and her colleagues had to seize every chance to reapply it when the actors returned backstage. In terms of costumes, as most clothes in Maoist China were in drab colours of blue, grey, and green, she had to use steam pots in the kitchen of the theatre to dye the costumes bright red and blue to match the imagined colours of Congolese clothing.<sup>61</sup>

The situation that smaller drama troupes faced was even more challenging. A drama troupe from Yangzhou was preparing their production of *War Drums on the Equator*. When they heard that Haizheng had arrived in Nanjing, they immediately boarded a train to watch the performance, and were then able to spend that precious night studying drum dance from the Haizheng actors.<sup>62</sup> Li Qingying, an actress working in Haimen County in Jiangsu, did not even have the opportunity to watch the original production. To faithfully represent an 'African look', she collected all available issues of *People's Pictorial* which published photographs of African people.<sup>63</sup> The staging of blackness further took the form of participatory performance. The popularity of *War Drums on the Equator* kindled grassroots interest in producing the spoken drama in local theatres, factories, and schools, attracting many amateur performers. Wang Yi, then an elementary school student, recalled how he and his classmates were so deeply fascinated by

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'Toward thick solidarity: Theorizing empathy in social justice movements', *Radical History Review*, no. 131 (2018), p. 190.

<sup>60</sup>For instance, in Shanghai on 13 August 1965 alone, three different productions of *War Drums on the Equator* were scheduled: aside from the original production by Haizheng, there were two Shanghai local adaptations by the Renmin Shanghai Opera Troupe and Qinyi Shanghai Opera Troupe, and each of them was fully booked. See *Xinmin wanbao*, 13 August 1965.

<sup>61</sup>Hangying, 'Feizhou guy yu tufeng wu [African drum and indigenous dance]', *Tianjin ribao*, 29 December 2020.

<sup>62</sup>Gu Menghua, *Xi meng ren shang* [Theatre, dream, people, and death] (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2011), p. 178.

<sup>63</sup>Wang Qingheng, *Laojie Fengcheng* [Old streets in Haimen] (Suzhou: Suzhou daxue chubanshe, 2014), p. 170.

drum performance that they used any household object as percussion instruments that (re-)sounded the Congolese soundscape in domestic spaces.<sup>64</sup>

The performance of blackness at the local level contributed to a multisensory and participatory aesthetic of internationalism, which further thickened the ideological lesson of Afro-Asian solidarity to embodied, everyday experiences of experiment and excitement. The stories of the sweating bodies, versatile hands, black oil paints, and evaporating steams bestowed the staging of blackness with irreducible specificity and sensorial concreteness, and they also allow us to recognize creative appropriation, local wisdom, and untiring curiosity for cultural difference among Chinese performers and audiences in the mid-1960s.

### Intermedial adaptations

In addition to locally produced spoken dramas, *War Drums on the Equator* was adapted in many regional operatic forms, such as Sichuan and Shanghai opera. A dance drama, *The Raging Congo River*, was also based on it. When adapting *War Drums on the Equator* into other forms, theatre professionals demonstrated acute awareness of the expressivity of their medium and endeavoured to showcase their creativity so as to distinguish their own works from existing productions.<sup>65</sup> In the final section of the article, I turn to *The Raging Congo River*, one of the most successful and enthusiastically received adaptations of *War Drums on the Equator*, to explore how the dance drama creatively utilized the artistic expressivity of music and dance, which, while generating tremendous sonic and kinaesthetic attractions of internationalism, broke new ground in the development of Chinese dance. This case study illuminates how the staging of the Congo Crisis contributed to the development of Chinese performance culture, not just diversifying its themes, but effectively propelling formal innovations.

*The Raging Congo River* was produced by the China Opera and Dance Drama Theatre (Zhongguo geju wuju yuan) in collaboration with the East is Red Choreography Group (Dongfanghong biandao zu) in 1965. This period, as observed by Emily Wilcox, witnessed daring choreographic innovations in the field of dance, which included 'xiqu-style national dance dramas on modern Chinese revolutionary history, ballets on modern Chinese revolutionary history, large-scale song and dance epics dealing with both Chinese history and contemporary international events'.<sup>66</sup> As a highly acclaimed dance drama on the subject of Congolese decolonization, *The Raging Congo River* not only introduced international subject matter to the repertoire of Chinese dance drama, but effectively appropriated foreign kinaesthetic expressions that expanded the lexicon of Chinese dance.

While *The Raging Congo River* preserved the original storyline and main characters of *War Drums on the Equator*, the production team also made considerable efforts to adapt a script-centred spoken drama into a non-verbal dance drama. In so doing, they strove to utilize fully the expressivity of the medium of music and dance and develop a

<sup>64</sup>Wang Yi, 'Wo de huaju qingxu [My fate with spoken drama]', <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/41377161.pdf>, [accessed 12 June 2023].

<sup>65</sup>Wan Ping and Yan Ming, 'Chuanju lao yishujia koushushi zhi Yang Chenglin pian [Oral histories of seasoned Chuan opera artists: Yang Chenglin]', *Chengdu daxue xuebao*, no. 4 (2014), p. 110.

<sup>66</sup>Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies*, p. 151.

kinaesthetic expression of internationalism.<sup>67</sup> In the spoken drama, sonic expressions provided the main sensuous appeal, and yet in the dance drama adaptation, where dialogue and soliloquies were absent, passionate roars of revolutionary slogans such as ‘*Mai Mulele*’ or ‘*Uhuru*’ could not be directly voiced.<sup>68</sup> As a result, the production team of *The Raging Congo River* turned to the musical score and choreography to reconstruct the theatrical and affective intensity of the original spoken drama.

As to the use of music, the dance drama departed from the Western tradition that deployed mostly classical, symphonic music; instead, it introduced Chinese instruments and integrated vocal singing—both choral and solo—in the dance performance. Songs were present in every scene of the dance drama, but each served a different function: they supplemented what the choreography could not directly reveal, introduced the development of the storyline, or expressed the interiority of the characters. These songs were later circulated through audio discs and songbooks beyond the theatrical space of the performance, which further cemented the nationwide, inter-medially transduced popularity of the dance drama. While some music was lyrical and melancholy, narrating the miseries of the Congolese under colonialism, other parts exemplified the upbeat, militant aesthetics of Maoist China, which expressed individual indignation against racism and colonialism and called for concerted resistance from the national community. Furthermore, the composers incorporated foreign musical elements into these songs. For instance, the short and repeated pattern of drumbeats were extensively featured in the dance drama to emulate the Congolese soundscape, whereas American jazz music, despite its origins in the African American community, was used to symbolize the decadent, reactionary culture of capitalism.<sup>69</sup>

The use of music to progress the story and the careful differentiation of different musical styles not only helped to express the content and emotions of the dance drama, but further remade the musical conventions of dance drama from a highbrow genre to a mass-oriented art form that embraced diverse styles and elements, thus responding to the call for the massification of culture in socialist China. In a review by Wang Zhenya, a renowned composer from China’s Central Conservatory of Music, he celebrated these innovative designs in music. The success of *The Raging Congo River* opened up new possibilities for dance drama, an art form that was formerly associated with Western high culture. The art of dance drama, Wang believed, should not limit its content to love stories or the ancient or supernatural worlds of knights, princesses, and fairies, which would only serve as a bourgeois pastime; instead, as *The Raging Congo*

<sup>67</sup>Dongfanghong biandao zu, ‘Benteng de jiliu [Running torrents]’, *Wudao*, no. 4 (1965), pp. 3–5.

<sup>68</sup>In Haizheng’s spoken drama production, there was a note section in the pamphlet distributed to the audience that introduced a few Swahili words used in the spoken drama, such as the magic spell in guerrilla warfare ‘*Mulele Mai*’ and the pan-African slogan ‘*Uhuru*’. The pamphlet served as sonic cues that guided the Chinese audience, who were largely unfamiliar with the culture and history of Congo, to pay attention to political slogans and the revolutionary soundscape of decolonizing Congo.

<sup>69</sup>It is not without irony that in associating jazz music with (white) America, the dance drama erased a history of modern China’s encounter with African American musicians. As documented by Nan Enstad, cabarets in Shanghai in the 1920s and 1930s provided a space for African American musicians to perform and conduct business as equals. See Nan Enstad, ‘Smoking hot: Cigarettes, jazz, and the production of global imaginaries in interwar Shanghai’, in *Audible empire: Music, global politics, critique*, (eds) Ronald Radano and Tejumola Olaniyan (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 58.

*River* exemplified, dance drama was capable of exploring and expanding its representational capacity to portray revolutions and express international and interracial solidarity.<sup>70</sup>

As to the choreography of the dance drama, *The Raging Congo River* deployed mostly group dance in an effort to highlight the strength of the collective. Key scenes in this dance drama featured spectacular group dance: in the prologue, there was a carnivalesque drum dance that celebrated Congolese independence from Belgian imperialism, and the drama concluded with a uniform marching dance of guerrilla soldiers. While drum dance was one of the many audiovisual attractions of the original spoken drama, *The Raging Congo River* used African dance as the mainstay of their choreographic vocabulary. The performance of African drum dance was no less challenging to this group of Chinese dance artists, as the movements, which involved dynamic moves of the head, the chest, and the waist, were all fresh to them. Sun Tianlu, who played the role of a revolutionary leader, recollected that the dancers seized every opportunity to watch the performance of the visiting Congo-Brazzaville ensemble, learn from their colleagues from OSDE who had visited Africa, and memorize African choreographic movements in tireless rehearsals. Through these practices, the dancer's bodies became an active site that inscribed the traces of choreographic trainings and interracial exchange, capable of unleashing 'the affective power of embodied aesthetic culture'.<sup>71</sup>

Sun's account emphasized that the choreographic expressions of drum dance derived from the lived experiences of Africans, and thus they authentically reflected the revolutionary life of decolonizing Congo.<sup>72</sup> Although Sun, like his contemporaries, showed a propensity to homogenize Africa, his recognition of the inherent connection between life experience and kinaesthetic expression, albeit simplified and idealized, illuminated the epistemological origin of Chinese dancers' dedication to the study of drum dance: it was much more than the acquisition of technical skills to achieve choreographic authenticity, it entailed the transfer of life experiences from Congo to China.

### Coda: The paradox of the everyday

On 19 February 1965, Tian Han went to Guangbo Theatre to watch *War Drums on the Equator*. In his diary, the seasoned playwright wrote: '[The spoken drama], though not showing much familiarity with life, was abundant with political passion'.<sup>73</sup> Tian Han's critical view of the flawed representation of Congolese life was echoed by Chen Feiqin, a high-ranking cultural cadre at Haizheng who oversaw the production of *War Drums on the Equator*. Although Chen was impressed by the precision with which the spoken drama grasped the central conflict in the political life of Congo—the struggle between the imperialists and the revolutionaries—he found that the depiction of the everyday

<sup>70</sup>Wang Zhenya, 'Fan zhimin zhuyi de songge [An ode to anti-colonialism]', *Renmin yinyue*, no. 4 (1965), p. 14.

<sup>71</sup>Wilcox, 'Performing Bandung', p. 519.

<sup>72</sup>Sun Tianlu, 'Tong huxi gong zhandou [Breathe together, fight together]', *Wudao*, no. 4 (1965), p. 7.

<sup>73</sup>Tian Han, *Tian Han quanji* [Complete works of Tian Han] (Shijiangzhuang: Huashan wenyi chubanshe, 2000), vol. 20, p. 336.

was quite flattened and mechanical.<sup>74</sup> In other words, despite the endeavours of the production team to solve the dilemma of going into life, through political knowledge, fieldwork interviews, and embodied practices of drum performance, Congolese social life remained largely impenetrable.

If we compare the representation of Africa in *War Drums on the Equator* with later works such as 'Ode to Friendship' (*Youyi song*, 1973) or *Rainbow of Friendship* (*Youyi de caihong*, 1975), which were made in the early 1970s by those who had visited the continent or worked for the TAZARA Railway, we can almost immediately see how they represent different ways of encountering Africa. Despite the claim of *War Drums on the Equator* to authentically exhibit the embodied and affective knowledge of Congolese life, it nevertheless treated Congo—and by extension Africa—as a footnote to Maoist internationalism, in which drum dance, music, and people were all mediated through the political imagination of racial and class struggle. In the latter, by contrast, we start to see a translingual exchange between Chinese and Swahili,<sup>75</sup> tropical plants of East Africa, and ordinary interactions between Chinese workers and African colleagues, a kind of knowledge that was absorbed, almost subconsciously, in the everyday. Not only did the military theme of decolonization give way to the enthusiasm of socialist construction, but ordinary emotions such as humour, novelty, and frustration, which reflected the everyday experiences of Chinese workers in Africa, started to surface as a natural and organic component of life.

The divergence between the two modes of representing life was informed by changing historical conditions between the 1960s and 1970s. Domestically, after the waning of the revolutionary fervour of the mid-1960s, China in the 1970s witnessed a renewed interest in the normalization of the everyday. Internationally, as the discourse of anti-imperialism gradually lost its appeal to many recently independent African countries,<sup>76</sup> China's foreign relations with Africa transitioned to prioritizing socialist development.<sup>77</sup> Under these new socio-political conditions, a new type of embodied and affective knowledge about Africa came into being, which was attained—in lieu of political imagination and theatrical re-enactment—through the interracial encounters and everyday interactions that Chinese technicians, workers, and artists experienced in Africa.

**Competing interests.** The author declares none.

<sup>74</sup>Chen Feiqin, 'Tan *Chidao zhangu de chuanguo* [On the creation of *War Drums on the Equator*]', *Wenxue pinglun*, no. 1 (1965), p. 2.

<sup>75</sup>In Laurence Coderre's analysis of 'Ode to Friendship', she argues that the comic effects of the cross-talk dwells on the translingual mismatch between Chinese and Swahili where 'language falls intentionally and spectacularly short of revolutionary ideals' (181), which reveals both the limit of translingual practice and that of Maoism. See Laurence Coderre, 'Ma Ji's "Ode to Friendship" and the failures of revolutionary language', in *Maoist laughter*, (eds) Ping Zhu, Zhuoyi Wang and Jason McGrath (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019), pp. 179–196.

<sup>76</sup>Monson, *Africa's freedom railway*, p. 27.

<sup>77</sup>Wang, *China in the world*, p. 139.

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