

Kofi Awoonor and China: Travels of Afro-Asian Poetry in the Early 1960s

By Mingqing Yuan | July 6, 2022

Monica Popescu's new book brings postcolonial studies under the "Cold War lens" to examine the latter's buried traces in African cultural productions.[1] It goes beyond the Cold War binary to emphasize African writers' autonomy and creativity in search for literary aesthetics. Even though it mentions fleetingly some African writers' engagements with Afro-Asian associations, however, it does not go deep into Africa's "writing with" Asia and Latin America. Current studies on the communist camp's cultural influence over Africa tend to focus on the Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau (AAWB), in which China is positioned as a dominant influence in competition with the Soviet Union and the United States to win the "Third World." [2] This focus on China in another way ignores the agency and autonomy of African writers and nations in these interactions. Not intending to argue against China's influence over the AAWB Colombo office, this essay would like to call more attention to the active participation of other Afro-Asian writers and nations in these Afro-Asian interactions. The concentrated attention towards the AAWB can overlook other channels of exchanges and literary genres other than novels. This essay attempts to catch a glimpse into textual and writerly travels between West Africa and China in the early 1960s, using the example of Kofi Awoonor to examine aesthetic and interpersonal connections across different locations. It hopes to bring African poetry into the discussion of the cultural Cold War and unearth the dynamics and multifaced impacts of the Cold War on literary productions.

Most existing publications linking the Cold War and African literature focus on the dynamics and textual circulation of novels written in English, especially from established postcolonial writers. Other forms of travels in that era are not given enough attention, especially textual travels of poetry through oral performance. On August 25, Kofi Awoonor, still known as George Awoonor Williams, dressed up in traditional clothes and performed his poems *Black Eagle Awakens* with an African drum in a poetry recitation concert in Beijing.[3] The concert was organized by *Poetry* (Shikan), a national magazine established in 1957 focusing on poetry. Poets from Sudan, Vietnam, New Zealand, and Indonesia also read their poems, followed by battle songs from the United States, Cameroon, Somali, Congo, Guinea, Algeria, and Ghana.[4] Awoonor's poem was commissioned by his Chinese hosts to corroborate Mao Zedong's Statement on *Supporting the American Negroes in Their Just Struggle Against Racial Discrimination by U.S. Imperialism*, a declaration released under the request of Robert Williams on August 8, 1963. The poem first captures the pains and sufferings of the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism and then depicts the freedom fight as a long march across the African continent, which received "the freedom shouts of our black brothers" in the United States and joined the chant of "Uhuru, uhuru, uhuru." [5] The metaphor of long march also echoes the March on Washington. In retrospect, Awoonor traces his writing and reading of this poem in Beijing back to the oral literary tradition in Ghana.[6] In addition to "Black Eagle Awakens," Awoonor also wrote a poem to commemorate "Du Bois' death in Ghana" under

the request and read them to massive audiences in Guangdong and Shanghai after his performance in Beijing.[7] To some extent, on the textual level of these poems, Awoonor's journey to China and the context of the poem's appearance are nowhere to be found, even though a trace of Afro-Asian solidarity looms in the background.

Meanwhile, Awoonor's use of poetry to express solidarity in Beijing was not a lone act. It was out of a consensus among Afro-Asian poets. Before coming to Beijing in late August 1963, Kofi Awoonor, as the secretary of the Ghana Society of Writers and editor of the magazine *Okyeame*, "conference hopped" from the Afro-Asian Writers' Executive Meeting in Bali, Indonesia (July 16–20) to the ninth World Conference against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs in Hiroshima (August 5–7).[8] The meeting in Bali passed a resolution on poetry that supported the creation, translation, publication, recitation, and exchanges of Afro-Asian poetry.[9] Similarly in the early 1960s' China, the public fever over poetry, especially its recitation, had turned poetry "into a mass-performance art, a state-sanctioned cultural form aimed at engaging and placing on public display the revolutionary passions of China's urban populace." [10] Poetry was deemed as a genre that is closer to people and literary traditions, more expressive and not an imported genre like the novel.

Awoonor's travel in China shows a bilateral interaction within but also beyond the frame of the AAWB, while the travel of his poems also helps us to map the print culture and circulation network within the People's Republic of China (PRC) intersecting with the ones under the support of the Soviet Union or the United States. Two days after Awoonor's performance, the poem *Black Eagles Awakens* appeared in *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party. It was republished in the April 1964 issue of *World Literature* (Shijie Wenxue), a monthly magazine and the official channel of translating and publishing foreign literature in the early 1960s. In June 1964, a poem anthology came out under the same name, *Black Eagle Awakens* (黑鹰苏醒), by Writers' Publishing House. The anthology includes these two commissioned poems and seven others about Awoonor's sightseeing in different Chinese cities. Poems about love and homeland in the Chinese anthology also appear in his English anthology *Rediscovery and Other Poems*. The latter was published by the CIA-backed Mbari Press in Nigeria in January 1964. The overlaps of Awoonor's Mandarin and English anthologies show the writer's own dynamic crossings through different camps and agency in utilizing different networks of visibility. In 1965, the AAWB anthology of *Afro-Asian poems* published "Black Eagle Awakens" in Colombo. Duncan Yoon analyzes the poem through the frame of symbolic Maoism.[11] If Awoonor's trip to China is taken into consideration, Maoism in his works from the period can be seen to spring from concrete travels and embodied experiences. The hidden context of the poem and the only existence of Awoonor's poems about his China trip in Chinese further exhibit the rift and information gap divided by the Cold War geopolitical delineations.

The appearance of Awoonor's poem both in Beijing and Colombo exhibited the cooperation between the PRC and the AAWB. Awoonor also joined the efforts to promote shared literary aesthetics and nationalist writings beyond national borders, which could be taken as a non-alignment literary movement in the cultural Cold War. Awoonor's travel to China in 1963 was not accidental. Before his trip to Beijing, he had been to the Soviet Union in 1961 and toured Eastern Europe. He also met Han Beiping and Du Xuan, members of Chinese Writers Association, in February 1962 in Accra. Han and Du came to Ghana after their attendance at

the second Afro-Asian Writers' Conference in Cairo. They were invited by Crakye Denteh, the then president of the Ghana Society of Writers. Under the guidance of Felix Morisseau-Leroy, they stayed in Ghana for 11 days. They visited the University of Ghana as well as the Ghana Drama Studio and talked to Efua Sutherland and Prof. Joseph H. K. Nketia. They also watched Joe de Graft's play *Sons and Daughters*. All these were recorded in detail in Han and Du's travelogues.[12] These interactions confirm the active role of Nkrumah's government in supporting writers and institutions as well as Ghanaian writers and intellectuals' initiatives in forming national literature and establishing relationships with other nation-states. They also influenced China's imagination and representations of Africa and the writers' understandings of African literature in that period, giving rise to the imagination of Africa as a revolutionary continent. Back in China, Han Beiping published an introductory piece on Western African oral literature in 1963. He refutes the colonial idea of Africa as a continent devoid of literature by praising its oral literary tradition "as deep as ocean and as shining as the diamond." [13] Han also cites talks with Kofi Awoonor and Keïta Fodéba (1921-1969) to validate his opinions. Afro-Asian cultural interactions were not a one-way travel from China to Africa, even though undeniably, these arranged tours on an elitist level also silenced other voices.

However, these elitist writerly travels in the early 1960s came to a sudden halt. The state facilitated these interactions, but this also determined their relative unsustainability. In 1966, the coup d'état against Nkrumah's government took place during his visit to Beijing. In the same year, Mao started the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution that paralyzed the whole nation. The previously mentioned Chinese writers suffered to different degrees. As "one of Nkrumah's blue-eyed boys brought in by the party machinery from the universities," Awoonor wanted to travel after the coup to the United States for a PhD program funded by the Fairfield Foundation supported by the CIA.[14] He felt relieved that his older passport had expired, so that he did not need to hide his visa to China.[15] He was even accompanied by Dennis Duerden of the Transcription Centre in London to apply for a visa for the United States in 1968.

Years later in an interview, Awoonor admitted, "I was inspired also by my association with some of my good friends in Asia. [...] I was going in and out of places like Indonesia, Algeria, China, and India. I discovered the poetry of Mao and Ho Chi Minh." [16] The poet also acknowledged the influences of his contacts with Asian writers and texts in the Cold War era, which helped him see the commonality in themes and narrative patterns and "design and construct theories of our [African] literature from these possibilities." [17] Despite the short life and elitist nature of these travels, literary exchanges and knowledge sharing through Afro-Asian solidarity left traces in one way or another on all involved actors. National politics entangled with the Cold War geopolitics reside not only in grand narratives but also in writers' biographies and the traveling path of literary works. The oral performances of poems add another dimension to the definition of world literature based on circulation and calls for more attention to the poetic genre. The rather inconspicuous "writing with" within the "Third World" also requires more scrutiny of texts beyond literary writings in the Cold War era.

[1] Popescu, Monica. 2020. *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies and the Cold War*. Durham: Duke University Press.

[2] See: El Nabolsy, Zeyad. 2021. "Lotus and the Self-Representation of Afro-Asian Writers as the Vanguard of Modernity." *Interventions* 23 (4): 596-620; Djagalov, Rossen. 2020. *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press; Halim, Hala. 2012. "Lotus, the Afro-Asian Nexus, and Global South Comparatism." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32 (3): 563-583. See: Vanhove, Pieter. 2019. "'A World to Win': China, the Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau, and the Reinvention of World Literature." *Critical Asian Studies* 51 (2): 144-165; Brazinsky, Gregg. 2017. *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry During the Cold War*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press; Yoon, Duncan M. 2015. "'Our Forces Have Redoubled': World Literature, Postcolonialism, and the Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau." *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2 (2): 233-252.

[3] "Beijing host poetry recitation concert in support of anti-racist struggles" [北京'反种族主义诗歌朗诵会'], *Poetry*, 1963, September: 37.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Awoonor, Kofi. "Black Eale Awakens". *Afro-Asian Poems: Anthology*, Vol. 1, Part 2, 1965, 41-45, 45.

[6] Awoonor, Kofi N. 2006. *The African Predicament: Collected Essays*. Ghana: Sub-Saharan Publishers: 35.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Leow, Rachel. 2019. "A Missing Peace: The Asia-Pacific Peace Conference in Beijing, 1952 and the Emotional Making of Third World Internationalism." *Journal of World History* 30 (1): 29.

[9] "AAWB executive committee's Resolution on Poetry" (非洲-亚洲作家会议), *Poetry*, 1963, August: 26.

[10] Crespi, John A. 2009. *Voices in Revolution: Poetry and the Auditory Imagination in Modern China*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press: 142.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824837532>

[11] Yoon, Duncan M. "'Our Forces Have Redoubled': World Literature, Postcolonialism, and the Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau." *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2015, pp. 233-252., doi:10.1017/pli.2015.11.

[12] Du, Xuan. 1964. 西非日记 [West Africa Diary]. Beijing: Writers Publishing House; Han, Beiping. 1964. 非洲之夜 [Nights in Africa]. Tianjin: Baihua Edition.

[13] Han 1963: 101-110.

[14] Awoonor 2006, 16.

[15] Ibid., 26.

[16] Willemse, Hein. 2004. "Kofi Awoonor in conversation with Hein Willemse". *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde*, 41(2): 192. <https://doi.org/10.4314/tvl.v41i2.29685>

[17] Ibid.

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