

# Encountering Chinese Modernity: The Emerging Popularity of Chinese Television Drama in East Africa

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**Abstract:**

Today, the China-Africa relationship taking shape in both physical and symbolic spaces is reordering the global landscape. While increasing numbers of media studies are focusing on Chinese news media in Africa, what is largely missing from this scholarship is information pertinent to various other Chinese cultural forms; for example, television dramas and movies. In contrast to African viewers' somewhat indifferent reception of news productions by Chinese media, more recent times have seen two Chinese television dramas receive an unexpectedly enthusiastic reception by East African viewers. This cultural phenomenon gives rise to a range of questions, such as the choices of Chinese television dramas, the main factors and the key players involved in the transnational flow. In a bid to address these questions, this article employs various methodologies, including content analysis and interviews structured to stimulate a preliminary discussion. It suggests that at this stage, Chinese television dramas are committed to conveying a favourable image of a social/cultural China to the East African public. However, at the same time, the type of modernity that is attractive for East African viewers and the public in general is contested within China, as well as between China and East Africa.

## Introduction

Over the past few years, concomitant with its growing awareness of - and aspirations to better - international communication for projecting a favourable national image and building Chinese soft power in the global symbolic domain, the Chinese state has launched a grand 'going out' project. As part of this project, media is one of the highly visible fields at the forefront (Sun 2010, 2016; Hu/ Ji 2012; Zhao 2013). Out of all the genres, news has proven to be a very important area. The Chinese state has invested considerable funding and expectations in this genre. Of all the foreign destinations, Africa has emerged as a continent that the Chinese state views as advantageous for projecting a favourable image of China. The latter has invested considerable time and effort in setting up news branches on the African continent. In addition to the historical legacy of the Cold War era, contemporary times have seen increasing co-operation between China and Africa. This cementing of relations has inspired both sides to consider further collaborations in various fields.

Despite the increasing numbers of studies focusing on the effects of Chinese news media in African countries (Gagliardone 2013; Wasserman 2016; Zhang/ Mwangi 2016), the recent emergence of Chinese serial dramas in Africa's television sector has drawn little attention. While the current lack of research into Chinese television dramas in Africa is understandable given that it is an emerging cultural phenomenon, the importance of investigating this area is being increasingly emphasised. In fact, recent developments support the need to begin an inquiry into the transnational flow of Chinese television dramas from China to Africa. Firstly, in contrast to how poorly news programmes produced by the Chinese state media in Africa have been received, Chinese television dramas have received a relatively enthusiastic reception in several African countries. Secondly, after the successful screening of the Chinese television drama *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era* (*Xifu de meihao shidai*) in Tanzania in 2011, China expressed an interest in introducing more Chinese television dramas to African audiences. In time, the hope is that 'they reach all African countries that have diplomatic relations with China' (*Xinhua* 2013). Thirdly, after first negotiating with African television stations and copyright holders, China is seeking to regularly screen Chinese television dramas on African television networks in the future. In effect, the increasing exportation and circulation of Chinese television dramas in Africa is producing a new wave of transnational

cultural flows. The issue of how it differs from or shares similarities with flows on other continents gives rise to a number of inquiries that invite exploration.

In addition to news programmes, Chinese television dramas are likely to have an increasingly visible cultural presence in the transnational space between China and Africa. As Chinese television dramas increase their presence in the African cultural landscape, numerous questions are emerging that remain to be answered. If the transnational flow of Chinese television dramas is part of China's current 'going out' policy, how do the goals of this policy influence the selection of Chinese television dramas for African audiences? Which other factors have been taken into consideration in the negotiation process of selecting and remaking the final screen candidates, and who are the main players involved in the selection and in transnational circulation?

One theoretical thought that informs the discussion about the transnational flow of media products is two dominant views of communication (Carey, 1988, 1989). The first views communication as a transmission process, which focuses on the speed and effect of sending and circulating information across time and space (Sun 2010; Terry 2016). It is more concerned about whether the message successfully arrives at the target audience for the purpose of control (Sun 2010). With a critique of the first view, the second one defines communication as a cultural process that tells stories with specific codes (Carey 1988, 1989). Its aim is to maintain the society with the representation of shared beliefs (Carey 1989). As Australia-based Chinese media scholar Wanning Sun (2010) points out, lack of the cultural view of communication leads to very little success for Chinese news media seeking to go out and appeal to foreign audiences. If the cultural dimension is vital to the success of communication, the emerging popularity of Chinese television dramas in Africa leads us to wonder how a cultural view of communication finds a place in the transnational flow of Chinese television dramas from China to Africa. More specific questions that need to be asked include: which types of Chinese television dramas are chosen for screening to African audiences? What messages do these television dramas convey to African viewers? To what degree do African audiences engage with Chinese television dramas? What functions have Chinese television dramas performed in the transnational space since their first exposure to African viewers?

This article is a preliminary attempt to examine the transnational process involved when making Chinese television dramas accessible and enjoyable for African viewers. For the purposes of this investigation, focus is primarily on the East Africa region. Given that Africa is a sizable continent consisting of a diversity of ethnic groups, cultures and societies, the umbrella term 'East Africa' is used to refer to the region consisting of Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda. Kiswahili is the main everyday language spoken by ordinary people in the East African region, which has been identified as a place where Chinese television dramas are promoted and consumed.

To address the questions raised above, this article first offers a general account of the production and consumption of Chinese television dramas in post-Mao China. This brief overview suggests the role of Chinese television dramas as a contested site for debating the problems of Chinese modernity. After providing a brief overview of the emerging presence of Chinese television dramas in Africa, the second part of the article moves on to discuss the main players involved in the remaking of Chinese television dramas for East Africans. It pays particular attention to the specific story of *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era*. The third part of this article places the focus on East Africans' viewing experience of Chinese television dramas, shedding light on the function of this cultural form in a specific transnational context. The fourth part provides an overview of the merits and limits of Chinese television dramas in China-Africa communication. This article concludes with the call for more research in the future on popular culture in the transnational space between China and Africa. In terms of the sources and methods employed, Chinese-language literature written by Chinese media academics, intellectuals, propaganda officials and media professionals has proven a crucial source for facilitating understanding of the intentions, motives, tensions and negotiations embedded in China's grand 'going out' project (Sun 2015). I have examined Chinese news reports and papers published in Chinese academic journals as key texts, with the aim being to attempt to make sense of Chinese television dramas in Africa. A number of media practitioners engaged in Chinese external communication, along with some East African individuals, were interviewed to ascertain their on-the-ground experience of Chinese media production and consumption.

### **Stories of post-Mao modernity: contemporary Chinese television dramas in China**

In post-Mao China, television dramas based on domestic themes and personal issues have become an important genre for Chinese viewers. Before exploring this genre in detail, it may be useful to explore the broader picture of the development of Chinese television dramas in post-Mao China. Since the early 1990s, the production of Chinese television dramas has increasingly been dominated by a strong commercial drive, with further market reorientation in the telecommunications sector (Zhu et al. 2008). Strengthened by these years of development in post-Mao China, not only has it grown into a sizable industry, but it has also extended its outreach to target foreign viewers. Chinese official documents and television industry analyses reveal that China has been the world's number one nation for television drama production in the world since 2011. For example, 17,000 episodes of television dramas were produced in China in 2012; 15,983 episodes were produced in 2014; and 16,540 in 2015 (Li 2016).

China Studies scholars, particularly in the fields of cultural and media studies (Zhu et al. 2008; Sun 2008; Teng 2014; Zhang 2016), have consistently demonstrated that more than entertainment, television dramas that are produced in and about the post-Mao China function as a public forum, a means by which one can identify and discuss the political, socio-economic, cultural and technological changes that signal the modernisation of China. All of these changes have contributed to a rise in the production and consumption of television dramas based on domestic themes and personal issues. Following the release of the television drama *Yearning (Kewang)* in the early 1990s, family drama has gradually become a politically and ideologically safe topic in the television drama category (Kong 2008); that is, when compared with other themes, especially those dealing with political topics, for example, the history of socialism (1949-1976) (Niedenführ 2013; Sun 2016).

Two of the above social changes speak directly to this interest in family dramas. The first is the transformation of interpersonal relationships that has occurred in post-Mao China. As the economic reform was pushed further, the socialist mechanism that positioned Chinese individuals in the state-individual axis and defined work commitment and personal relationships as within the collective interest was dissolved (Zhu 1994; Sun/Lei, 2017). The Chinese people were required to reorient themselves, to

embrace market-led principles and values. In the personal sphere, rather than it being a smooth process, this transition was fraught with confusion and pain for many Chinese individuals, as they contemplated the ultra-sensitive negotiations that would determine their courtship and marriage choices. Key issues include courtship dilemmas, divorce, extramarital affairs, cross-generational conflict, leftover women (*Shengnü*)<sup>1</sup>, and the commercialisation of sex and intimacy.

Secondly, post-Mao China has seen the emergence of a new middle class, whose members consider themselves to be the legitimate group to narrate Chinese stories in contemporary times (Zhao 2013). The compressed process of modernisation has enabled China to achieve a similar level of industrialisation to that of its western counterparts, and has resulted in wide social stratification and class reformation. Concomitant with post-Mao China's marginalisation of peasants and workers, who were defined as the 'masters of the nation' in Mao-era China, an urban middle class has emerged whose consumption power and lifestyles have drawn global attention. Along with popular culture and sports celebrities such as *Zhang Ziyi* and *Yao Ming* (Zhao 2013), the urban middle class has been increasingly portrayed as representative of China both within and outside of the country. As a consequence, in Chinese popular culture, the focus of the majority of contemporary Chinese television dramas is on the upper and middle classes in urban China.

In recent years, Chinese television dramas about contemporary China have become increasingly visible in the transnational space of screens around the world. The specific Chinese television dramas that are chosen for transnational circulation and consumption vary according to the different contexts of the target countries and regions. Thus, the subsequent cooperation mechanism and outcome in the transitional flow of Chinese television dramas differs case by case. As Africa is the new continent, Chinese television dramas are reaching out for viewers, with the specific forces and considerations involved in the process of choosing and remaking such dramas being addressed in the following section.

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<sup>1</sup> Leftover women (*Shengnü*) has become a popular term in contemporary China and is widely used to refer to women who remain unmarried in their late twenties and beyond.

### **A brief overview of the emerging presence of Chinese television dramas in Africa**

The viewing of Chinese television dramas in Africa is a recent cultural phenomenon. It has occurred decades later than in other regions, for example, in Chinese-speaking diasporic regions and in China's neighbouring Asian countries (Niedenführ 2013). The transnational flow of Chinese television dramas commenced in the early 1990s. Initially, it was mainly concentrated in China's neighbouring Asian countries. Driven by the grand 'going out' project, television drama was identified by the Chinese state as one of the main genres offered to foreign audiences in the television sector (Sun 2016). Despite the current cultural deficit, recent years have seen the rapid expansion of transnational flows of Chinese television dramas worldwide. Africa is earmarked as the emerging market with the highest potential for consumption of Chinese television dramas (Zhang/Wang 2016). To ascertain how and why this genre has been selected, remade, screened and consumed in Africa, it is important to first explore the various inroads that China is making in Africa's media landscape. Firstly, an account of the early development of Chinese television dramas in Africa is necessary. This will require an examination of the very early stage of Chinese television dramas in East Africa, a key region in China's diplomatic strategy.

In 2010, the Chinese Cultural Counsellor in Tanzania considered Chinese television drama an excellent cultural product for showcasing China abroad. Accordingly, the medium was placed on the going-out agenda by Chinese cultural counsellors after various African countries expressed their interest in knowing more about China (Huang/ Liu 2013; Lü 2016). Two primary concerns for the Chinese decision-makers who were charged with selecting Chinese television dramas suited to East African consumption were 1) the image they delivered, and 2) how they would be interpreted by African audiences.

In the view of the decision-makers and concerned intellectuals, Chinese costume dramas, despite enjoying a degree of popularity in some foreign countries, were not the preferred option for African audiences. Besides, Hong Kong-produced Kungfu movies had long been consumed by African audiences (van Staden 2016) and Chinese propaganda officials expressed their concern that Kungfu movies and Chinese costume dramas would stereotype the Chinese as calculating and scheming, as a people who enjoy

physical fighting (Yan 2014: 8-9). Further examination will reveal if this is how African viewers decoded Kungfu and Chinese costume dramas during different historical stages (van Staden 2016).

The selection of *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era*, claimed to be the first Chinese television drama introduced to East Africa, resulted from the convergence of popular interest in East Asia with that of East Africa. Featuring a light-hearted plot and humorous dialogue, the storyline tells of the often turbulent relationships between urban young couple Mao Doudou and Yu Wei and their in-laws in present day China. Prior to its exposure to East African viewers, this drama had already delighted viewing audiences, not only among urban Chinese people in mainland China, but also in Taiwan and Japan (Yan 2013). In 2010, *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era* won the special award for a foreign drama at the annual International Drama Festival in Tokyo, Japan. This international festival, which was founded by JBA and NHK in 2007 to promote Japanese broadcast programmes in global markets, states that the awarding criteria of 'marketability' and 'merchantability' take priority over 'artistry' or 'show quality' (International Drama Festival in Tokyo 2017). In Tanzania, although the production quality was not particularly good, a home-made version of a television drama titled *Mother-in-law* was screened on national television. For Chinese decision-makers who were looking for a Chinese drama for East Africa, it offered timely evidence of the potential popular interest of East African viewers in television dramas featuring domestic themes.

### **Dubbing in Kiswahili: Remaking Chinese television dramas for East African audiences**

Once the television drama was chosen, the following issue China needed to deal with was how to remake the Chinese television drama to enable it to linguistically make sense and speak to East African viewers. As a result, Chinese cultural counsellors and propaganda officials considered precise dubbing in Kiswahili to be a vital strategy. The reason for this, first and foremost, is the importance of the Kiswahili language to East African people. For years, Kiswahili has been promoted as the lingua franca in the East Africa region, where each country has a wide diversity of languages. Tanzania, in particular, has been more successful in widening the use of Kiswahili in everyday work and life among the masses, due to the political and social goodwill awarded to Kiswahili (Habwe 2009). In the linguistic



remaking process, the initial subtitled version was later replaced by dubbing in response to certain considerations. One problem with the subtitles was the contrast between the small size of the most common television sets in Tanzania and other East African regions, and also the long length of words in Kiswahili (Li 2015). Another factor was the preference expressed by Tanzanian national television for dubbing screen products (Lü 2016). The foreign screen products that Africans generally consume are largely labelled either in English or in the languages of their countries of origin. For those who consume films in local video parlours in Tanzania, what Birgit Englert alludes to as 'delayed dubbing' is added by locals who earn their living by over-voicing references and background information (Englert 2010).

Due to the absence of a professional dubbing team, China Radio International (CRI) colleagues who specialised in Kiswahili, staff from the Tanzanian embassy in Beijing, and international students were all invited to participate in the dubbing of *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era* (Lü 2016). Following the advice of Chen Lianying - an expert in the Kiswahili language who had previously worked for CRI - three Kenyan actors were selected and invited to Beijing to dub the three leading drama characters, i.e., Mao Doudou, Yu Wei, and Mao Doudou's mother-in-law (Lü 2016). In a bid to provide local viewers with a better sense of the drama, the title was changed to '*Dou Dou na mama wakwe zake*' in Kiswahili (*Doudou and her two mothers-in-law*) (Lü 2016). China's adherence to professional dubbing added to the wide appeal of *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era* in Tanzania (Li 2015; Lü 2016).



Figure. 1 The poster features the drama *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era's* three leading Chinese characters, as well as one Kenyan actor and two actresses who dub the three leading characters in Kiswahili. Source: CRI official website. [http://gb.cri.cn/42071/2013/03/28/1545s4067691\\_2.htm](http://gb.cri.cn/42071/2013/03/28/1545s4067691_2.htm) accessed on 4 June 2019.

In contrast to the African policy in Mao-era China when Mao Zedong was the national leader from 1949 to 1976, Chinese political, economic and cultural elites in post-Mao China, especially in recent years following economic reforms, have increasingly advocated the adoption of a commercial approach to transnational cultural flows. As a result of the screening of *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era*, China and Tanzanian national television entered into an agreement that allowed China to include advertisements with the screening. Liu Dong, who was the Cultural Counsellor at the time stated: 'Chinese screen products cannot always be offered for free. At the least, African countries could pay one dollar, and we sign a deal. That counts as a business.' (Lü 2016: 41).

The export of Chinese television dramas to the African public may be considered a form of what Wanning Sun refers to as 'soft power by design' (Sun 2016), which means that the transnational flow of Chinese media products, especially those launched by state institutions, is greatly influenced by the Chinese state's intention and guidance. In most cases, particularly with regards to news, due to its propaganda element, the reception by foreign audiences is generally low. Whether contemporary Chinese television dramas could generate an appeal among African viewers remained a question for the Chinese prior to its screening. For example, Wang Liping, the drama's screenwriter expressed her concern when she learned that the television drama would be introduced to African viewers. 'I couldn't help wondering [...] can the African audience accept Chinese television drama which comes from thousands of miles away?' (Li 2015). However, she had no reason to worry, as the enthusiastic reception of Tanzanian viewers exceeded all expectations.

*Daughter-in-law's wonderful era* was first screened on Tanzanian national television at 6:30 p.m. in November 2011. In response to the huge demand expressed by Tanzania's viewing audiences, the national television station reran the drama in 2012. The plethora of positive reports that appeared in the Chinese media bolstered the confidence of Chinese political, economic and cultural elites. The widely-claimed success of this drama in Tanzania gave them the confidence to introduce more Chinese television dramas to African viewers.

### Marketing more Chinese screen products to Africa

The year 2012 has seen further moves by the Chinese state to market more Chinese screen products to Africa. During the second half of 2012, the State Administration of Press, Radio, Film and Television<sup>2</sup> (SAPRFT) launched a project titled 'China-Africa cooperation on film and television product[s]' (*Zhongfei yingshi hezuo*). With an investment of 50 million RMB each year, the project has undertaken to select, dub and supply 10 Chinese television dramas, 52 television films, 5 cartoons, and 4 documentaries annually to the African public (Lü 2016). The languages used for dubbing include English, French, Portuguese, Arabic, Hausa and Kiswahili (Lü 2016).

In order to ensure the completion of this project, the following broad range of players, including state media institutions and commercial companies, have become involved in the specific implementation of each stage: China Radio International, China International Television Company, Shanghai Radio and Television, Jiangsu Provincial Radio and Television, Huana Bailu, Huayi Brothers, and Huace Movie and Television (Zhang 2015). Shortly after the project was announced, one of the main players, i.e., CRI - the state-owned international radio broadcasting network that also comes under the supervision of the SAPRFT - set up a centre for dubbing and subtitling Chinese films and television dramas. It came as no surprise to find that CRI is one of the top-ranking state media institutions focusing on external communication. In China, it broadcasts mostly in foreign languages; that is, in 65 languages including Kiswahili (the East African local language), Hausa (which is widely used in West Africa) and Arabic (which is widely spoken in North Africa). A recent development has been CRI's signing of a contract with PWANI TV Kenya, which has a television segment known as 'China theatre' (*Zhongguo juchang*) (Fang/ Chen 2017). This segment is solely dedicated to the screening of dubbed Chinese television dramas.

The commercial company StarTimes specialises in the development of telecommunications in Africa. It began a telecommunication infrastructure construction project in Africa in 2002, promoting digital television with the ambitious goal of 'enabl[ing] every African family to afford, see and enjoy digital television' (Lü 2016: 40). Having now extended beyond hardware

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<sup>2</sup> SAPRFT is short for the State Administration of Press, Radio, Film, and Television, formerly the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. It is the executive branch under the State Council of China and its primary task is the administration and supervision of the Chinese press, television, radio and film industries.

construction, it has developed television content provision as one of its multiple businesses in Africa. For example, responding quickly to the state project of promoting Chinese television drama in Africa, StarTimes established its dubbing team by recruiting employees from Africa. Among all the channels it has developed in Africa, it has launched one that specialises in broadcasting Chinese television dramas. The years 2014 to 2016 witnessed a campaign promoting Chinese television drama in Africa hosted by the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television and organised by StarTimes. The 2014 campaign featuring the theme 'Beijing story goes to Africa' travelled through several countries (Kenya, South Africa, Uganda and Nigeria), promoting six Chinese television dramas. The year 2016 saw the third season of the campaign, which promoted 8 Chinese television dramas and 17 Chinese films across African countries.

The SAPRFT has established a guiding principle for the selection of screen products for African viewers. Essential to their selection are: 'a realistic theme, mainstream value, and [depictions of] the lives of ordinary people' (*xianshi tici, zhuliu jiazhi, baixing shenghuo*) (Yan 2013, 2014). As a result of this principle, television dramas about people's everyday lives in contemporary China are the priority when selecting dramas for African viewing audiences. Following the screening of *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era*, other Chinese television dramas were selected and dubbed for East African viewers, including: *Jin tailang's de xingfu shenghuo* (*Jin tailang's happy life*); *Laoma de huayang nianhua* (*Mum's glorious days*); *Zanmen jiehun ba* (*Let's get married*); *Fendou* (*Striving*); *Wo de qingchun shui zuozhu* (*Who is the master of my youth*); *Beijing qingnian* (*Beijing youth*); and, *Hunyin baoweizhan* (*The battle of defending marriage*). All of these Chinese television dramas are set in contemporary urban China. So, what specific Chinese stories do these dramas tell? How do these stories speak to a post-Mao Chinese society that has moved a long way from the socialist era? What messages do these dramas deliver? How and to what degree do East African viewers engage with these dramas? Bearing these questions in mind, I will take *Daughter-in-law* as the example in the next part of the article in order to closely examine the content and implications of this particular drama.

**Daughter-in-law: a story of a good time or a bad time?**

*Daughter-in-law's wonderful era* was one of the most watched home dramas in China in 2009. A light-hearted romantic comedy, it tells the story of an urban couple who manage and balance their relationships with family members on both sides. The ups and downs that characterise Mao Doudou's relationships with her two mothers-in-law constitute the main storyline. After their first unsuccessful blind date and a couple of subsequent encounters, Mao Doudou (a thirty-year-old nurse) and Yu Wei (a photographer) fall in love and decide to get married. The various problems that follow the happy beginning emerge from their complicated family situation. Yu Wei has two sets of parents: both of his biological parents remarried following their divorce. There is a lot of tension between his biological mother, who has retired, and his stepmother, who is the manager of an advertising firm. His biological mother sees his stepmother as 'the third one' (*di san zhe*), who intervened in her family and lured her husband away from her. Due to the volatile situation caused by the antagonism between the two mothers-in-law, Mao Doudou goes to great lengths to please both mothers-in-law as much as she possibly can. After her second husband dies, the frugal, old-fashioned mother-in-law moves in. The young couple try to find various ways to manage their relationships with each in-law.

While there is essentially a comic theme, a great deal of conflict plays out due to the emergence of cross-generational differences that affect various issues. For example, the mother-in-law's values and management of the family economy leave Mao Doudou no option but to consume far less than she had anticipated. Strengthened by her own parents' support, Mao Doudou feels sympathetic to her mother-in-law's painful past. Her compassion allows her to look after her mother-in-law carefully and sensitively when the latter suffers a dramatic stroke due to mental stress following a financial fraud. Mao Doudou's kindness, resilience, tolerance and support finally move the mother-in-law to change her opinion of her daughter-in-law, and *Mao Doudou* convinces her two mothers-in-law to make peace with each other.

For Chinese viewers, *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era* depicts a harmonious, middle-class Chinese family facing some problems, though generally within a comic framework and with the promise of a happy ending. This TV drama, *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era*, has been nicknamed a 'daughter-in-law's

precious dictionary' (*baodian*) (Wangyi 2010). Chinese viewers, especially urban Chinese women, see this drama as a source of techniques and ways of managing the relationships with their mothers- and sisters-in-law. Following the depoliticisation of the domestic sphere in post-Mao-era China, it has once again become a high-profile space structured according to numerous axes, as well as class and gender. For many married Chinese women, how to manage their relationships with their mothers-in-law is a tricky and key issue. Many educated urban women, who were born in the 1980s and 1990s and see independence and privacy as modern values, experience tension with their mothers-in-law who adhere to traditional requirements and have certain expectations of their daughters-in-law. As Chinese scholar *Teng Wei* argues, the fighting between different generations of Chinese women in this television drama indicates that contemporary Chinese women still have to solicit men's gaze, recognition, and support (Teng 2014). Underpinning this fighting is the cruel reality of fighting for power, a determination to dominate and control more resources (Teng 2014). This is especially the case in China when the mother-in-law is from a lower class, and the daughter-in-law is either middle or upper class or on the path to becoming middle class. Although *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era* is a comedy, it explores the problems that arise when gender and class order dominate and shape family life. Chinese television dramas featuring family issues have a strong ideological function, which is to rewrite the gendered role in contemporary China (Teng 2014).

While the particular story of the daughter-in-law Mao Doudou embodies the deep issue of inequality in contemporary China, it was chosen by the Chinese state to be the first drama that would represent China when shown to an East African audience. When this television drama travels across the national border, the ways in which it is appreciated or criticised in the transnational space vary from country to country. The public reaction associated with the drama is largely subject to the specific political, economic, social and cultural contexts of the individuals in the reception country and the extent to which these contexts are similar to their Chinese counterparts.

### **Encountering post-Mao Chinese modernity: the viewing of Chinese television dramas in East Africa**

The critiques of the problematic post-Mao Chinese modernity embodied in Chinese television dramas have little effect on how East Africans see these stories. Instead, the screening of contemporary Chinese television dramas in East Africa and Africa in general has started to transform the stereotype and the conventional way locals imagine China. A number of observations made by local viewers offer descriptions and explanations of the emerging popularity of Chinese television dramas in East Africa.

Ahmed, a Tanzanian TV presenter who subsequently joined the dubbing of Chinese television drama *Jin Tailang's happy life*, spoke about *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era*, stating that:

'When we walk on the street and see a poster for the TV series, we can recall the names of the characters, such as *Mao Doudou*, the daughter-in-law. The series is really popular' (Chen 2013).

When explaining why this drama is so popular among Tanzanian viewers, the director of the television programme department at the Tanzanian Broadcasting Corporation said in a phone call he made to CRI's Kiswahili department:

'We received a great deal of letters and calls from viewers. Many viewers say (they) get to understand the inner world of Chinese by watching this television drama, and they admire the life of Chinese. Although there are cultural differences between [the] two countries, marriage and family are the common theme[s] of human beings. They wish to see more of these television dramas' (Yan 2013: 13).

Another Tanzania national official, who used to be the minister for the Ministry of News, Youth, Culture and Sports in Tanzania, said:

'This television drama enables the Tanzanian people to understand the joy, anger, sorrow and happiness in Chinese family life and [to] see how Chinese repair the emotional crack between family members with communication and wisdom' (Li 2015: 28).

A Tanzanian worker told a Chinese journalist:

'I'm really happy that this drama reminds me of our living setting. The tension *Yu Wei* is caught up with when he encounters financial difficulty, family conflict and other marriage issues has no difference with that of the husbands in our Tanzania families. He is more conscientious' (Wang 2015: 30).

For East African viewers, what may become obvious to them in *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era* are the similarities and differences in social and cultural dimensions between contemporary China and their home country. In this sense, the viewing of Chinese television dramas is a cultural process of communication in which values, beliefs and sentiments are echoed, negotiated, shared and maintained. Thus, Chinese television dramas would appear to have a stronger capacity than news programmes to enable locals to access and gain insight into China, the Chinese people and the Chinese way of life.

In the view of many Tanzanian viewers, *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era* enables them to see and feel the similarities in everyday life - family life in particular - between China and Tanzania. While this television drama delineates the roles and the fulfilment of Chinese individuals in the domestic sphere, a type of community is formed between the two families of two generations. Whenever difficulties occur, they rally round and help their family members to 'bounce back'; that is, to re-establish, consolidate and continue with their lives. However, irrespective of any positive message, a more critical view of the problematic gender and class relations embedded in Chinese television dramas does not seem to be what the Chinese elites wish to highlight.

In addition to pointing out the social and cultural similarities between China and East Africa, an observation featuring a comparative perspective encourages us to think further about how Chinese television dramas position themselves differently when compared to video products from elsewhere, thus gaining a favored place in the East African video market. The Kenyan actor who dubbed the leading male character Yu Wei in *Daughter-in-law's wonderful era* appreciates and distinguishes Chinese television dramas from their western counterparts for the strong family values that they contain.

'In western television dramas, the sexual openness and little stress on family is unacceptable for me. I see a form of humbleness in Chinese television drama. Chinese keep a low profile, value moral principles and stress family harmony, which is also what our Kenyan culture pursues' (Li 2015: 28).

What is becoming clearer is that the specific ingredients of Chinese television dramas help to create a closer bond with East African viewers in comparison with other screen products that are available in this region. The screen products in this region are diverse and imported from all over the



world, either legally or illegally. There are cowboy films and political thrillers from the United States, telenovelas (soap operas) from Latin America, all-singing, all-dancing dramas from Bollywood, and movies and home videos from Nollywood, featuring “tales of love and betrayal, revenge and redemption, decadence and deliverance” (Anonymous 2013: 109). East Africans have had access to a global viewing experience for a relatively long time. Against this background, Chinese television dramas bring something new, as well as something that resonates. On the one hand, Chinese television dramas are new in the sense that they tell stories about contemporary China that East African people have lacked exposure to. On the other hand, the themes, the settings, the stories and the messages within Chinese television dramas can be easily related to by East African viewers, as these dramas deal with “the challenge of everyday life” (personal communication, 21 November 2017). The challenge of everyday life is what local people are concerned with, rather than other issues that are far removed from them (personal communication, 21 November 2017).

Viewers in other East African countries also recognise other moral and intellectual elements that speak to them in contemporary Chinese television dramas. The audience response to *Lala go* (*Du Lala shengzhiji*) provided further evidence of the appeal of Chinese television dramas for East African viewers and for women in particular. *Lala go* tells the story of how a young and simple Chinese woman working for an international company in urban China climbs the career ladder from the bottom to the executive level. After watching it, a Kenyan woman said that she saw the story as a source of inspiration, which encourages the transformation of a person from a nobody into a somebody (Lü 2016). Chinese official and commercial discourses allude to this drama as a positive story celebrating the determined spirit of Chinese youth. However, Chinese scholars stress the dilemmas and paradoxes that confront contemporary Chinese youth in the unfair competition for social mobility, in their efforts to achieve a better position and, by extension, to turn their middle-class dreams into a reality (Zhang 2016).

### **Discussion: the merits and limits of Chinese television dramas in China-Africa communication**

When we compare the imagery portrayed by Chinese state media and Chinese television dramas, the latter more successfully portray a vision of China that is easier to understand and is more enjoyable for foreign audiences. As mentioned in the introduction, despite great effort, the Chinese news media have achieved a far less positive outcome than expected in the global space due to a range of unsolved issues (see Sun 2010, 2016; Hu/ Ji 2012; Zhao 2013; Zhang 2013). In addition to the mode of communication Wanning Sun suggests, China-based scholars Hu Zhengrong and Ji Deqiang (2012) maintain that when attempting the globalisation of Chinese news media, China must deal with both the domestic challenges and the hegemonic global order. The observation of a Tanzanian journalist perhaps speaks more directly to the everyday practice of news produced by the Chinese media. In his view, the difference lies between digging and being told what to deliver in daily journalistic practice (personal communication, 14 April 2017). While African news media engage in investigation, the role of African public-oriented Chinese news media is to report (personal communication, 14 April 2017). In terms of news about China, the Chinese state media deliver what the Chinese government *wants* the foreign public to know about China, rather than what the foreign public *wants* to know about China (personal communication, 17 April 2017).

Adopting the cultural view of communication, Chinese television dramas open an alternative window to display a social/cultural China, showcasing the everyday reality of Chinese people. As East African viewers experience considerably less exposure to China, they can either identify with, keep their distance from or even reject the range of feelings that Chinese individuals express in response to the tension and conflict that must be dealt with as the storyline unfolds. Chinese television dramas tell the story of urban Chinese middle-class life, a dominant theme that China aims to disseminate in its bid to convey a positive image of China to African viewers. The reality is that the Chinese state is the key stakeholder in promoting and facilitating the transnational flows of Chinese television dramas (Flew 2016). The market force is ready to participate in the selection and transnational circulation of Chinese television dramas that will appeal to potential African viewers.

The representation of contemporary China with its urban middle class at the forefront differs from the image disseminated during China's Maoist era (1949-1976), when peasants and workers were considered the masters of the nation. While the producer-subject could claim legitimate identity in the Chinese modernisation process in the Maoist era, they were also representative of China and the Chinese in the media outputs produced for foreign audiences. This representation is evidenced in the print output offered to East African audiences during the period of Mao Zedong's leadership when television was unavailable as a popular medium. In 1974, the tenth issue of the Kiswahili version of the magazine *China Pictorial* (*Zhongguo Huabao*) featured workers in the oilfields, workers in a mechanics factory, students from agricultural colleges who joined the farmers in the fields, a scientific investigation team on the Earth's highest mountain (Mount Everest) and educated women working on farmland. These were the main figures described and pictured in the magazine. In contemporary China, although the official discourse still recognises and appreciates the contributions made by farmers and workers to China's development, these cohorts have largely lost their economic, social and cultural entitlements due to the global process of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Zhao 2008). Meanwhile, a Chinese urban middle class has emerged and become a new force supporting the legitimacy of the post-Mao Chinese leadership. Canada-based media scholar Yuezhi Zhao (2013) extends the argument further by opening a discussion on the fundamental questions in China's quest for soft power. One such question underscoring China's involvement in global media and communication is whether China is genuinely committed to building an alternative global political and economic vision that is different to the current one, which is committed to preserving a capitalist hegemony (Zhao 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Given the involvement of both the Chinese state and the market in the transnational flows of Chinese television dramas, does the genre have the potential to promote something different from the current capitalist ideology, or, is it limited to communicating aspects of urban middle-class modernity with Chinese characteristics to East African audiences, especially those who are seen to be living in a poor state? Another issue is, although the current data reveals the emerging popularity of Chinese television in

East Africa, what we know about the local viewing experience is still very limited. In this sense, this article raises more questions and encourages further fieldwork about the transnational consumption of Chinese popular culture in Africa. Therefore, more audience studies need to be undertaken if we are to determine how the people in East Africa and Africa in general view Chinese television dramas, and how local structures, as well as gender and class relations, influence their understanding of the genre, of China and of the world in general.

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