

**Making space for emotions:  
exploring China-Africa ‘mediated relationships’  
through CCTV-9’s documentary *African Chronicles* (*Feizhou jishi* 非洲纪事)**

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Abstract

This article explores how the image of China ‘as engaged with Africa’ is promoted within China, by looking at a State-sanctioned, Chinese-language media text targeting the domestic audience. It first proposes two paradigm shifts: in the direction adopted in investigating China’s soft-power, and in the dimension considered in exploring China-Africa media interactions. After reviewing the relevant existing literature, it introduces *African Chronicles* (*Feizhou jishi* 非洲纪事), a TV documentary screened by CCTV-9 in 2011, and carries out a social semiotic analysis of the first episode, *A Journey through Memory* (*Jiyi zhilü* 记忆之旅). The analysis reveals that the storytelling of Prof. Ge, the protagonist, is instrumental in reminding the audience of the old rhetoric of the revolutionary years; it also serves the function of dismissing its adaptability to the contemporary postsocialist era, characterized by a less explicit political engagement and the prominence of economic interests. More importantly, this article illustrates that what unites China and Africa in this episode is the ‘emotional bond’, in its different variations, which has the power to stand the test of time and shorten both a physical and an emotional distance through what Ahmed calls a ‘narrative of love’ (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2004).

**Keywords:** China-Africa, media, soft power, nostalgia, emotional bond, national identity, memory, history

In the winter of 2000, during one of my first study trips to the People's Republic of China (PRC), I was enrolled as a short-term international student at Beijing Language and Culture University. During one class we listened to a radio broadcast, originally aired in 1983, reporting

on the diplomatic visit to China of Masire, then president of Botswana. I still remember the official and festive atmosphere conveyed by that piece of news: with a highly rhetorical language, it celebrated the long-standing friendship between the two countries. In 2006, when another study trip took me to Beijing, I noticed the sudden appearance of billboards in the central tube stations (Figure 1), featuring pictures of African natural landscapes. The title of the photo series was *In Love with Africa* (*Aishang Feizhou* 爱上非洲)<sup>i</sup>, and its author was Luo Hong, the General Manager of one the most successful bakery chains in China (Holiland), but also a photographer and philanthropist who became famous for his passion for Africa.



Figure 1. Billboard of the series *In Love with Africa* (Beijing, 2006)

In 2012, during a more recent research trip, while I was zapping through the different channels of China Central Television (CCTV), I came across a documentary on the country's medical cooperation with Africa, that covered both the first contingent of Chinese medical teams sent to the continent in 1963, and the more recent programmes of health diplomacy. The episode ended with a question on the future of Africa and the role of China, that was answered with an engaging climax in the background music and an evocative low-angle shot of the Chinese flag.

At that time, the above Chinese texts caught my attention first of all because they had a specific and explicit focus on China's engagement with Africa and, secondly, because they were intrinsically *rhetorical*, unexpectedly *emotional* and predominantly *(audio)visual*. It was not a coincidence that they circulated in the public domain in the years in which China hosted the domestic editions of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). This milestone event restored Africa's centrality in China's foreign policy after the neglect of the 1980s-early 1990s (Taylor 2011) and revamped the country's first wave of 'African fever' of the revolutionary years (Larkin 1971). It becomes evident that the increasing presence of China-Africa-related texts which I was witnessing was the response of the Chinese Party-State to a

new priority in the political agenda: crafting and promoting a positive image of China's engagement with Africa *within* China. It is here, in the domestic realm, that national media play a crucial role, as they are typically requested to create official narratives, with the final aim of manufacturing consent and guaranteeing social stability.

In this contribution, I will turn my attention to an example of this kind of media text in order to answer the following research questions: in the light of the different coexisting legacies of postsocialist<sup>ii</sup> China, how is the image of China 'as engaged with Africa' constructed in State-sanctioned media texts circulated by the most powerful and popular medium, namely television? What are the linguistic and visual strategies, as well as the narrative techniques, used to craft a positive image of China's new engagement with Africa for the domestic audience, without undermining the legacy of the revolutionary years? What are the new social meanings attached to the diversified interactions and exchanges that characterize contemporary China-Africa relations, and how are they rendered audiovisually?

First of all, this article suggests a change in the paradigms that constrain the existing scholarly contributions in the field of China-Africa Studies, both in the *direction* adopted in investigating China's soft-power and Africa, and in the *dimension* considered in exploring China-Africa media interactions. It then reviews and extends the previous academic inquiries conducted on Chinese audiovisual texts representing China, Africa and China-Africa relations, by looking at a more recent and unexplored Chinese-language TV documentary. Empirically, it addresses the above research questions through a social semiotic analysis of the first episode, with a focus on the social meaning-making processes at work and the main themes that emerge from the text.

### **China's soft power, media and Africa: an inward-looking direction of inquiry**

At the turn of the twenty-first century, while China was trumpeting the fervour of its (re)intensified relations with Africa, the international community started to air concerns related to the country's growing interests and presence on the continent (Large 2008). As China was becoming increasingly self-conscious about the challenges to its international image, it started to show a genuine interest in the concept of 'soft power', defined by Nye (2004) as 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payment' (x).

In this context, promoting a positive image of China in Africa became a priority for the Party-State. Its favourite tools of soft power proved to be the major State-run media, such as CCTV and Xinhua News Agency, that soon became the protagonists of an impressive

expansion in the African continent. As a result, the majority of academic publications on China-Africa media interactions also focused on the 'Going-out' strategy launched by the Chinese government to encourage state media to expand overseas (Xin 2009; Gagliardone 2013; Zhang 2013). Arguably, going down the well-beaten research route of 'outward-looking soft power' (Barr 2011, 35) might shed light on just *one* direction of China's engagement with Africa, and repropose the dominant investigative pattern of China-in-Africa (as in Zhang, Wasserman and Mano 2016).

Instead, this article suggests the alternative direction of inquiry of 'inward-looking soft power' (Barr 2011, 35), that originates from more exquisitely domestic concerns, and aims at sustaining the Party's legitimacy, preventing social unrest and strengthening national identity (30; 34-5). I argue that this direction of inquiry will allow access into the more intimate sphere of China as a 'fragile superpower' (Shirk 2007), that has tended to remain out of sight in the mainstream approach to China-Africa relations in general, and to China-Africa media interactions, more specifically.

### **China-Africa 'mediated relationships': suggesting an audiovisual turn**

As a result of the burgeoning relations between China and Africa, academic publications on how China and Africa appear and perceive each other in the media have flourished. These include explorations of Chinese media (Shen 2009; Li and Rønning 2013), African media (Wasserman 2012; Skjerdal and Gusu 2016), Western media (Mawdsley 2008), as well as media from a variety of countries (Benabdallah 2015; Paterson and Nothias 2016).

Though extremely diverse, the above scholarly investigations all contribute to shedding light on an emerging field of academic inquiry. Nonetheless, they seem to share a common paradox: their titles feature words like 'representation' and 'portrayal', borrowed from the visual lexicon, but actually they neither mention nor engage with any form of (audio)visual materials. In most cases, this neglect results from the choice of print media and news reports as objects of analysis, and from the use of quantitative research methods. Whilst their findings confirm that national media mirror the pragmatic concerns arising from the political and economic macro-sphere of China-Africa relations, they are not revealing in terms of the 'broad range of emotions, feelings, and ideas' (Kellner 2000, 1) that national media play on.

Nonetheless, as demonstrated by the opening anecdotes, these elements are actually present in Chinese media texts on China's engagement with Africa; this article thus posits that they must have been occupying a scholarly blindspot, obscured by the focus on macro events.

It is television, 'with its emphasis on imagery, narrative, presentness, simultaneity, intimacy, immediate gratification, and quick emotional response' (Postman 1993, 16), that might offer new inputs for thinking about China-Africa media interactions and, consequently, lead to a different set of findings. This argument is confirmed by the few academic investigations into how China, Africa and China-Africa relations are constructed in Chinese TV texts targeting the domestic audience. Interestingly, they all come from Area Studies.

Strauss (2009) investigates China's rhetoric on China-Africa relations in a variety of official and semi-official discourses. She refers to one episode of the CCTV documentary *China-Africa: Sharing a Common Fate* (2007)<sup>iii</sup>: by focusing on the building of the Tazara railway (China's first ever aid project in Africa), it fully supports her conclusions on the longevity of revolutionary rhetorical tropes; first and foremost, a long-standing friendship based on a common history of colonialism. Nonetheless, the author also points out a progressive loss of attractiveness and even credibility by the old rhetoric, due to the profound changes in policy that characterize contemporary China-Africa relations.

Saavedra (2009) explores the image of Africa in the Cantonese soap opera *The Last Breakthrough* (*Tianya jiayi* 天涯俠醫, 2004)<sup>iv</sup>, broadcast by Hong-Kong based Television Broadcasts Limited (TVB), and sponsored by the Kenya Tourism Board. Despite perpetuating some stereotypes of Africa that are recurrent in Western popular culture, this TV drama about a medical mission in Kenya makes an effort to contextualize the continent's diversity, and recognize local knowledge.

Ferry (2012) focuses on the image of China in the TV drama *Forever Africa* (*Yongyuan de Feizhou* 永远的非洲, 2000)<sup>v</sup>, produced by CCTV and Henan Television, and the travel documentary *A Passage to Africa* (*Zoujin Feizhou* 走进非洲, 2003)<sup>vi</sup>, produced jointly by CCTV and Hong Kong-based Phoenix TV. Whilst the first text provides a micro perspective on the tensions between government operations and individual engagements, the second offers a macro perspective and proposes an educational model of mobility for the audience at home. Both texts represent China and the Chinese as in possession of scientific and civic knowledge, and aim at building a new narrative of the country's role on the global scene.

This article continues these explorations into what I conceptualize as China-Africa 'mediated relationships,' or 'new forms of action and interaction and new kinds of social relationships' (Thompson 1995, 83), intrinsic to their taking place within the media. Moreover, it advances the field by taking into serious and systematic account the audiovisual, and by drawing upon the empirical strength of working with Chinese-language primary sources, which

is inherent to Area Studies. It does so by examining a State-sanctioned TV text that was produced in more recent years and - until now - has remained uninvestigated both in English and Chinese-language academic research: *African Chronicles* (*Feizhou jishi* 非洲纪事).

### Screening China ‘as engaged with Africa’ for the domestic audience

*African Chronicles* (*AC*) is a 9-episode TV documentary that was first screened at 23:00 on 15 December 2011, as part of the programme *The Road to Discovery* (*Faxian zhilu* 发现之路)<sup>vii</sup>, by the Chinese edition of CCTV-9<sup>viii</sup>. Whilst TV documentaries developed during the Maoist years served a primarily political-ideological function, since the early 1990s there have been significant changes in their practices and forms (Berry 2010). Towards the end of the twentieth century, they entered a new phase of pluralism that gradually weakened the dominance of politics (Chu 2007). Nonetheless, as television is still held by the Chinese State as a tool for presenting official views of history, TV documentaries constitute 'a favourite format' (Müller 2013, 1) for promoting and creating consent on specific domestic priorities.

All episodes of *AC* are available on China Network Television (CNTV)<sup>ix</sup>, China's first national television website. Each of them lasts roughly half an hour, is set in a different African country, and tells different stories of China's engagement with Africa, under the following titles:

1. *A Journey through Memory* (*Jiyi zhilü* 记忆之旅);
2. *Chinese Medical Teams in Africa I* (*YuanFei yiliaodui shang* 援非医疗队 - 上);
3. *Chinese Medical Teams in Africa II* (*YuanFei yiliaodui xia* 援非医疗队 - 下);
4. *Lagos Adventures* (*Lagesi lixianji* 拉各斯历险记);
5. *Tazara Railway* (*Tanzan tielu* 坦赞铁路);
6. *Treasure Hunt in South Africa* (*NanFei xunbao* 南非寻宝);
7. *Love in Niamey* (*Ai zai Ni'yamei* 爱在尼亚美);
8. *Searching for the Pygmy Tribe* (*Xunfang Bigemiren* 寻访俾格米人);
9. *The Colours of Morocco* (*Moluoge de secai* 摩洛哥的色彩).

An attentive viewing of the whole documentary revealed that *AC* is actually a remake of the above-mentioned travel documentary *APTA*. This peculiarity might be explained by the fact that the latter ‘was one of the first television documentary serializations in China, heralding

a new entertainment market industry' (Ferry 2012, 215), and thus became a model for future documentaries.

More precisely, the aforementioned first episode of *AC - A Journey through Memory (AJTM)*<sup>x</sup> - appeared to be significantly different from *APTA*, and from all the other episodes of *AC*. This is not only because it specifically tells an official story of China's own engagement with Africa, but also because it presents original footage (both re-edited and unreleased), and an entirely new commentary aimed at providing the old rhetoric with additional contents and meanings.

## **Methodology**

The methodology used in this article derives from social semiotics, the science 'concerned with the social meanings constructed through the full range of semiotic forms, through semiotic texts and semiotic practices' (Hodge and Kress 1988, 261).

The units of analysis correspond to what Iedema (2001) identifies as 'generic stages' (189): they result from combined sequences that, in their turn, are understood as a range of scenes linked by a thematic or logical continuity. Stages introduce new arguments through changes in topic, time or place, or signal their boundaries with the use of different editing features or a different positioning of the character or viewer (190).

In the first episode, I identified six stages: Stage 1, or opening stage (Figure 2); Stages 2–5, or middle stages (Figure 3); Stage 6, or closing stage (Figure 4). I will provide detailed accounts and full transcripts for the opening stage and the closing stage, as they form the main narrative. Each table (Figures 2 and 4) accounts for both the visual – that is explained through a short description of what is seen on the screen, the most significant camera work and some significant still frames – and the verbal/aural – that is illustrated through my translation of the original Chinese scripts into English, and through basic information on what is heard on the sound/music track. The remaining four stages of the episode will be illustrated only through a brief description of the plot (Figure 3), as they correspond to sub-narratives and anticipations of upcoming episodes.

The analysis that follows pays particular attention to the three key metafunctions of the meaning-making process: 1) representational; 2) interactive; and 3) compositional (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006). Iedema (2001) explains each of them as addressing the following: 1) the representation of the world (visual, verbal, aural); 2) the positioning of characters and readers/viewers; and 3) the organisation of meanings into a dynamic text (191-3).

## *A Journey through Memory: a social semiotic analysis*

Opening Stage: China's 'emotional bond' with Africa via politics, revolution and fight (Figure 2)

Stage 1 (5' 40")		
Sequence	Visual	Verbal/aural
1	<p>[Opening sequence]            Montage of shots depicting African natural landscapes, and archive footage depicting Chinese and Africans            A variety of Chinese characters (Tazara railway, medical teams, Casablanca, diamonds, etc.) and the English word 'Africa' fade in and out            Scripts: <i>African Chronicles</i>  <i>Episode 1: AJTM</i></p>	[Woman singing 'Africa', in English]
1.1	<p>[Footage <i>APTA</i>]            Long-shots of a sunrise over the ocean            TV crew members are preparing their SUVs             Zoom in on a member of the crew (middle-aged man, wearing glasses)</p>	<p>[Waves]            Voice over (VO): 18th March 2003/for one of the CCTV crew of <i>A Passage to Africa</i>/is the first day in Africa/the expert of historical geography, prof. Ge Jianxiong/is the key team member</p>
1.2	<p>[<i>APTA</i>]            SUVs' journey begins             Night scene, busy streets of a city            Scripts: Morocco, Casablanca</p>	<p>[action music]            VO: The first stop is Morocco's Casablanca/the name of this North African city facing the Atlantic Ocean [piano music] is well-known by many Chinese/the romantic colours of a foreign land/are intertwined with a glorious history/Casablanca's night scene is charming            Off-screen voice: My first stop was Morocco's Casablanca/once I got there/I obviously recalled the film <i>Casablanca</i>/when I was there...</p>
1.3	<p>[Interview (I)]            Close-up (CU) on Ge Jianxiong (G), indoor            Scripts: Ge Jianxiong, Prof. at Fudan University</p> 	G: ... I was always somehow nostalgic/this nostalgia was for the image we previously had/the one we had through the newspapers/and we saw in other media/the one we gathered/and now we obtained evidence from reality/that's why I was nostalgic
1.4	<p>[Film excerpt: <i>Casablanca</i>, part of <i>APTA</i>]            Scripts: Film <i>Casablanca</i></p>	<p>[piano song: <i>You must remember this, a kiss is just a kiss, a sigh is just a sigh...</i>]            VO: 'Casablanca' is a film of 1943/a love story/that took place during World War II/for most of the</p>

		Chinese/Africa is just like this film/far away and mysterious/all the fragments of memory related to this film/accompany the crew's entire journey
1.5	[ <i>APTA</i> ] Moroccans walking on the streets of a city and performing daily activities; Ge enters an open market accompanied by a local	VO: Prof. Ge Jianxiong/is coming to Africa for the first time/in the past Africa was...
1.6	[Newsreel (N), colour and black-and-white] Medium-shots of rows of African soldiers (men and women) holding rifles and marching; bird's-eye views of crowds of people pouring into the streets 	... a recurrent word in Chinese newspapers, radio [news broadcast] and newsreels/this word became a fragment of memory in many people's growing up process [revolutionary song] G: I remember that when we were at elementary school...
1.7	[I] CU on G	G: ...we all knew that Africa had black people/it was where the black slaves came from/right?/Africa was fighting for its independence
1.8	[N, black-and-white] African soldiers shooting at an aeroplane and marching  Bottom-up shot of a statue of an African man	[news broadcast] VO: In the middle of the previous century/the entire world witnessed the rise of anti-colonial and national liberation movements/China, who had just freed herself from the colonial oppression/naturally looked at/a place with a common fate/the African continent [revolutionary song, climax]
1.9	[I] CU on G	G: I still remember very clearly/through newspapers I learnt that/King Farouk/was in Alexandria/and escaped by boat from his Summer Palace/soon afterwards/Nasser/nationalized the Suez Canal/then England and France interfered militarily
1.10	[N, black-and-white] Chinese mass-demonstrations, people hold banners in Tian'anmen Square   Extreme CU (ECU) on the front page of a Chinese newspaper	VO: In October 1957/to support Egypt/against the attack from the British and French forces/in every part of China/there were grand touring manifestations G: I can still remember...

1.11	[I] CU on G Scripts: Ge Jianxiong, Prof. at Fudan University	G: ...that the newspaper published a doggerel/I still remember the opening lines/'The first fire to attack Egypt/will increase the worries of the English Prime Minister'/I can't remember the rest/as the attack didn't succeed/the English Prime Minister/Anthony Eden had to resign
1.12	[N, black-and-white] Chinese masses clapping enthusiastically during an official speech	VO: This is China Central Newsreel and Film Studio's first filmic material/on China-Africa relations/carrying such an historical imprint/Africa entered the memory of the Chinese common people/that same year/Ge Jianxiong finished his elementary school in Shanghai
1.13	[I] ECU on a sepia picture of a child CU on G Scripts: Prof. Ge Jianxiong, Fudan University  Long-shots on the Pyramids and the Great Sphinx of Giza; SUVs advancing towards the camera	G: We and Africa/in my impression/most of the times was/to support the African population/on one hand, in their independence, right?/independence from colonial countries/on the other hand, support from the aggression and interference by their formal suzerain countries/this became a basic pattern/thus, we and Africa in the beginning/had an emotional bond via politics/an emotional bond via revolution/an emotional bond via fight [theme song]

Figure 2. Opening stage

On the compositional level, this episode shows quite a complex structure. It results from the montage of the footage of *APTA* (including its archive footage of the newsreels of the mid-1950s-1960s), and the stock footage of an interview with Ge Jianxiong 葛剑雄 (Ge), recorded once he returned to China after the shooting of *APTA*. As a result, it combines the pedagogical style of the old Chinese documentary - that 'imagined its audience as ... unified masses mobilized according to the needs of the Party and state' (Berry 2010, 98) - with the objectivity typical of travel documentaries, as well as with the spontaneity of on-the-spot footage and free-flowing interviews associated with *new realism* and the New Chinese Documentary Movement (98-9). In terms of diegetic time, the episode covers fifty/sixty years, and temporal continuity is maintained through the arrangements of visual fields as a result of the narrating voices: they are edited as if they were Ge's memories.

The initial flashback serves the purpose of (re)introducing Ge to the Chinese audience, in the same way in which he entered their homes less than a decade earlier: as one of the key crew leaders of *APTA*<sup>xi</sup>. Nonetheless, in the new footage, Ge appears to be different both on the representational and on the interactive level. He is portrayed exclusively through close-ups and in the same indoor setting; a strategy that connotes intimacy and familiarity, and is aimed

at establishing an interpersonal relationship with the viewers. He always speaks in the first person, but never faces the camera directly (a strategy that is commonly avoided as it is thought to convey aggressiveness). He is slightly turned to the side, facing an interviewer that the audience cannot see or hear: this is instrumental for his act of recalling memories, and creating a conversational flow with the audience at home.

A significant novelty is that in addition to the voice-over by a male narrator, typical of documentaries' expository mode, we hear also Ge's voice - a feature of documentaries' poetic mode (Nichols 2010; Cao 2015). Moreover, Ge includes and involves the viewers in his storytelling quite explicitly by using the pronoun *us*, that guarantees a less dry style compared to *APTA*.

Despite the apparent aura of subjectivity, however, Ge is designated to be the enunciating subject, to "'speak for" the nation ... with the power to speak with the force of history' (Anagnost 1997, 4). This is demonstrated by the fact that his individual traits are defined by the historical, the political, the social and, even more interestingly, the mediatic. Moreover, his autobiographical accounts are constantly legitimized as bearing historical authenticity by the voice-over: this strategy contributes in rendering the opening stage a 'closed text' (Eco 1979, 49), one that guides the reader and offers a limited number of interpretive possibilities.

Ge reveals that when he got to Africa, he was overwhelmed by a 'feeling of nostalgia'. This is far from being uncommon in post-reform China, where nostalgia is a recurrent feeling resulting from the 'loss of a cohesive ideology' that

'prompted the disenfranchised populace to yearn for better images of life in the past. All of a sudden the prerevolutionary times, and even Mao's years, are glowing in their simplicity and solidarity, in their inexhaustible hopes and common destiny, their poverty and cruelty conveniently forgotten.' (Wang 2004, 213)

According to Ge's account, it was revolutionary media such as newspapers, newsreels and doggerels that worked as activators of nostalgia, but that also played a crucial role in the creation of China's 'own' memory of Africa. For this reason, the latter should be understood first and foremost as a 'media memory,' defined as

'the systematic exploration of collective pasts that are narrated by the media, through the use of the media, and about the media.' (Neiger, Meyers and Zandberg 2011, 1)

On the compositional level, the signifier 'Africa' is brought into the narrative via the city of Casablanca: this was the first stop of Ge's crew in *APTA*, and coincided also with his first physical encounter with the continent. The intertextuality with the homonymous Hollywood film helps the narrative to convey the image of a continent that is still considered 'far away and mysterious' by the majority of the Chinese people. There is an acknowledgement of the perceived physical and emotional distance between China and Africa, as well as of the existing lack of knowledge of the continent, caused by having never been there (a position possibly shared by most of the viewers at home). By trying to fill in this knowledge gap, this first episode, as well as the whole documentary, positions itself as having clear educational aims.

The images of Africa and China recalled by Ge correspond to the ones that were conveyed via the media back in the mid-1950s-1960s: the first, as a continent who is fighting for independence; the second, as a country that is supportive of African anti-colonial movements (Alden and Alves 2008). A climax is reached when the rhetorical trope of the 'common fate' is cemented: it is this commonality with China that renders Africa a place deserving to be looked at. On the contrary, colonial powers are associated with the action of military interference, and connoted negatively as oppressors and enemies.

It is worth pointing at another significant element that emerges in the last sequence, in which Ge summarizes the engagement with Africa of the revolutionary years with the expression 'emotional bond' (*qingjie* 情结), which is repeated three times. This concept is surely not new to the Chinese audience of Ge's generation, as it stands for the 'emotional bond with Africa'. The latter is the sentiment that was sanctioned, posthumously, as the one that united no less than Mao Zedong with the continent (Lu 2010). Through Ge's use of the inclusive first person plural, this 'emotional bond' via politics, revolution and fight becomes a part of the national character: to feel included as part of the 'we' – the Chinese – proposed by the narrative, means not only to acknowledge the legacy of the revolutionary years but, more importantly, to share China's emotional bond with Africa. The latter can be further understood in the light of what Sara Ahmed (2004) considers as a crucial element of 'the cultural politics of emotion': 'stickiness' (91). In her exploration into emotions and their ability to shape individual and collective bodies, she defines the latter as 'an affective quality of objects' (84), that 'involves a form of relationality, or a "withness", in which the elements that are "with" get bound together' (91). In this specific case, Africa is identified and repeatedly legitimized as an object of emotional relationship, and is endowed with meaning and value through a common

history of suffering, anti-imperialist solidarity and fighting spirit – this is what *sticks*. As a result, China and Africa can be understood as ‘sticky signs’ (195), or bodies that are aligned together thanks to the emotions created by language.

Middle stages: historical milestones in China-Africa relations (Figure 3)

Stage	Plot
2	In Algiers, the crew visits the Avenue De Pekin and Ge recalls Premier Zhou Enlai's visit to Africa, in 1963.
3	In Addis Ababa, Ge enters the building of the African Union and recalls Selassie's visit to China in 1971.
4	Ge visits a Chinese medical team in Algeria and provides an historical account of China's health diplomacy in Africa.
5	Ge recalls the building of the Tazara railway, which was completed over ten years, despite the skepticism of the West.

Figure 3. Middle stages

Closing stage: China and Africa in a new era of ‘mutual benefit’ and ‘joint development’ (Figure 4)

Stage 6 (5' 20")		
Sequence	Visual	Verbal/aural
6.0	[ <i>APTA</i> ] North-African women and men dancing and singing 	VO: On 25 October 1971/China's official seat at the United Nations was restored/the support from African friend-countries/played a crucial role/the long friendship between China and Africa/in this important moment/was confirmed
6.1	[I] CU on G	G: Even for our Olympics/we still needed some African delegates/to support us/this is something you can't discuss in terms of politics/who is supporting who/it's reciprocal/on the emotional level/it's an additional interpersonal tie/it's not a matter of being a powerful country/you are rich and we become friends, right?/but it is only if you are sincere
6.2	[N, colour] Africans dancing and exhibiting in front of Chinese delegates	VO: In the 1970s China/thanks to its relations with Africa/broke the era of the West's closure towards China/of the Cold War/as a result Africa/was covered by all national media/Africa became a symbol/of an era to remember/for all the Chinese people
6.3	[I]	[typing]

	ECU on a wooden elephant souvenir and on G, who is consulting one of his books	VO: In 1983 Ge Jianxiong entered Fudan University/and started his research on historical geography/this way, Africa became the topic of his research G: Following the changes that happened in my life/before I was a middle school teacher/then I became a researcher/and my personal interests/gradually shifted to African cultural history/to the role of Africa in the world's civilization
6.4	[I] Computer screen with an English-language curriculum vitae being updated G working at his computer CU on G	VO: Prof. Ge/has always been interested in Chinese migratory history/in recent years/he started researching Africa's historical geography/Africa from a propaganda keyword/became a research topic G: People of my generation/our emotional bond via revolution and fight/won't come back/and there's no need to/right?/so why did I just say/that I knew more about Africa than America?/this is what happened at that time/but we are opening up in every direction/and Africa has to have the status she deserves/there's no need to emphasize just one aspect
6.5	[APTA] SUVs passing by the ocean Long-shot of a little girl staring at the ocean Montage of shots of African natural landscapes, SUVs' journeys, and the crew's adventures, as well as African nomadic tribes, and local children's happy faces	[cars' engines] [waves] [engaging music, crescendo] VO: Today/touring Africa/what is surprising is the long history and rich culture/the instability of the past/has become rare/even if in some areas there are conflicts/and famine/thanks to the hard work of the Africans/this land, a long-standing friend of China/is gradually emerging from poverty/and embarking on an economic renaissance/peace and development are key in contemporary Africa
6.6	[APTA] Shots of Al-Azhar Mosque and some Western tourists Scripts: Cairo - the capital of Egypt Inside a market of touristic souvenirs, G negotiates with a local souvenir seller (in Chinese)	VO: After many years/China-Africa relations must enter/a new era of mutual benefit and joint development  [dialogue] G: '500 pounds/too expensive' Seller: 'handmade' (...) Seller: 'machine 5, handmade 20' G: '10' Seller: '20' G: '10' Seller: 'Ok'
6.7	[APTA] Back-shot of Ge, as he speaks through a walkie talkie; he is sitting next to the driver of one SUV, while they are entering a tunnel	G: We are now 100 km far from the Suez Canal Man's voice from walkie talkie: But today we cannot see the Suez Canal, as we will cross it from below G: It's 10.12 and 40 seconds/we are now officially entering the Suez Canal/this canal permits one-way traffic in both directions
6.8	[Slideshow (S), black-and-white]	[Ge talking through the walkie talkie]



	<p>Scripts accompanied by pictures (from the newsreels of Stages 2-5):</p> <p>1958: The first African country to establish diplomatic relations with China was Algeria</p> <p>1963: China sent the first medical team to Africa. In the years since, the country has sent 17,000 medical workers</p> <p>1963: Premier Zhou visited Africa and laid down the foundations of Sino-African friendship</p> <p>1969: China accepted the invitation of Tanzania and Zambia to start building the Tazara railway</p> <p>1976: Opening of the Tazara railway. This 1860 km-long railway is the symbol of friendship between Third World countries</p> 	
6.9	<p>[<i>APTA</i>]</p> <p>SUVs exit the tunnel and proceed on their journey</p>	<p>G: It's now 10.14 and 36 seconds, local time/we just exited the Canal/in just a few minutes/we left Africa and returned to Asia</p> <p>[theme song]</p>

Figure 4. Closing stage

History is an omnipresent element in every account of China-Africa relations. According to Raine (2009), ‘the intention is to be simultaneously assertive about the existence of a deep seated bond between China and Africa and reassuring about what it signifies’ (14). What is interesting about this last stage is that it opens on a more recent page in the history of China-Africa relations, and makes an effort to address contemporary dynamics and provide them with new meanings.

In the first sequences, two milestone events in the development of China are introduced: the country’s readmission to the United Nations in 1971, and its hosting of the Olympics in 2008. Despite more than three decades having passed between them, they are combined according to a logical link based on similarity: both events are associated with an increased visibility of China on the international scene. Arguably this narrative technique is employed in order to cope with the lack of temporal continuity in China-Africa relations: the decades when China ‘turned its back on the Third World’ (Van Ness 1993, 206) are cunningly avoided, and

this ellipsis aims at obliterating them from public memory. This is a perfect example of how China's official discourse on its own engagement with Africa is selective (Strauss 2009).

Probably in response to a question posed by the interviewer, Ge's narrative suddenly picks up a rather defensive tone (6.1), that is perceptible in all modes (verbal, visual, aural). He dismisses the possibility of a non-sincere friendship between China and Africa; one of convenience, driven by unbalanced economic power relations. The cause of disruption in his storytelling corresponds to the accusations levelled by the West against China's renewed interest in the continent: the 'new scramble' for Africa (Large 2008, 57). Ge's reaction should therefore be read as a defence against the Western critiques that scrutinize China; significantly, he uses another set of emotional expressions. The function of this defensive narrative through emotionality is at least twofold. Firstly, it attempts to perpetuate the 'emotional bond' of the revolutionary years, as a response to the interference from the West that caused an evident slippage in the 'stickiness' uniting China and Africa. Secondly, it aims at containing an evident criticality that emerged from China's official discourse of its engagement with Africa: China's 'divided image', or 'the divergence between how China sees itself and how the world sees China' (Wang 2011, 11). On the interactive level, this sequence is intended to comfort the domestic audience, by delivering a reassuring 'looked-for, unselfish, benevolent image of China' (Shen 2009, 443). This demonstrates that the Party-State is concerned with building support and consensus for China's recent re-engagement with the African continent, at home as well as abroad.

More importantly, in 6.4, Ge dismisses the adaptability of the 'emotional bond' through revolution and fight, which characterized the 'old' China-Africa relations of the mid-1950s-1960s. The prescriptive tone of his assertion is softened up by the rhetorical question he poses ('right?'), when he 'mocks' an interpellation to the viewers to persuade them that the political dimension is not the only one that matters - this is actually aligned with President Jiang's 'non-ideological footing' (Alden 2007, 15). In Barthes' terms, Ge 'naturalizes' China's engagement with Africa as apolitical, rendering it as the result of 'common sense' (2000 [1957], 11). The sort of disruption that this creates in the former well-established politically-driven rhetoric, identified as 'thick' (Alden and Large 2011, 26), is promptly recovered with the insertion of a new element that is driving China's re-engagement with Africa: that of economics.

The concepts of 'mutual benefit' and 'joint development', coming from both the old and the new discourses of China-Africa relations (Strauss 2009), are visualized in a negotiation scene between Ge and an Egyptian souvenir seller. It is significant that the latter speaks in Chinese (a proof of the recognition of China's cultural influence outside China) and that Ge, at

the end, manages to get the souvenir for 10 Egyptian pounds rather than 20, providing a real-life example of the so-called 'win-win' strategy. This scene is a perfect visualisation of 'a new type of strategic partnership with Africa' (in Olorunnisola and Ma 2013, 44) as outlined in the white paper *China's African Policy*, issued in 2006 - that China and Africa are equal partners.

In the following sequence, the voice-over praises Africa's long history and rich culture, as well as the continent's hard work and emergence from poverty, in a rather optimistic tone. All these rhetorical tropes are actually typical of China's own discourse of 'official national identity,' intended as

'a sense of China articulated by government and Party leaders as a part of their official responsibilities, a collectively determined official position regarding China's role in the world.' (Van Ness 1993, 196)

Similarly, the expressions 'economic renaissance' and 'peace and development,' that are here used to describe Africa, are also borrowed from China's own vocabulary of public diplomacy. In addition to what is highlighted by Ferry (2012) with specific reference to *APTA*, that

'[r]eferences to China's development (economic capital, entrepreneurship, citizen mobility) ... do not necessarily change or enrich the way the Chinese view Africa, but change and enhance the way they view themselves' (213),

I argue that in 6.5 even the reference to Africa is used to reinforce *China's own* official national identity, and to enhance the way the Chinese audience at home view *themselves*. In Ahmed's (2004) words, this sequence shows the features of a 'narrative of love', that works through identification and idealisation in order 'to extend the "ideal" that I seek to have onto others, who "can" return the ideal to me ... the extension of self in love' (129). What we see here is an ideal image of the African continent that can return the idealized image of China to China itself. Rather than China's Other, Africa is idealized and fetishized as an(o)ther China.

Once the crew's tour is coming to an end, the historical milestone events addressed in Stages 2-5 are arranged in the form of a black-and-white slideshow, which anchors them to specific meanings. The slideshow is activated while the crew is crossing the Suez Canal, with the clear intention to reinforce the title and leitmotif of the episode: 'a tour of Africa is also a journey through memory' (*Feizhou zhixing ye shi jiyi zhilü* 非洲之行也是记忆之旅). As the

crew emerges from the tunnel, the intended meaning to be promoted is that the distance between China and Africa, physical but also emotional, has been shortened.

### **Making space for emotions**

In the introduction to this article, I shared some personal anecdotes in order to draw attention to an existing gap in the literature on China-Africa media interactions: how China promotes itself ‘as engaged with Africa’ for the domestic audience. The aim was to go beyond the macro events that characterized previous academic scholarship in the field of China-Africa Studies and explore a more intimate sphere. The latter proved to be accessible only thanks to a solid engagement with the audiovisual as well as with Chinese-language primary sources; in this sense, *AJTM* constituted an ideal entry point.

Some of the findings of the social semiotic analysis reveal that the episode constructs and promotes an official version of China ‘as engaged with Africa’, from the revolutionary era through to the contemporary era, that still features the official rhetoric of old China-Africa relations, but at the same time dismisses its adaptability to the postsocialist era. This allows space for new rhetorical devices, as well as for alternative stylistic and narrative strategies. The storytelling of Ge, for example, meets the need to revitalize the Chinese collective memory of Africa, and (re)establishes the proximity between the audience at home and the continent; but it also serves the ideological function of promoting a non-politicized version of contemporary China-Africa relations, in line with the new economically-driven priorities.

More importantly, the main academic contribution of this article is to reveal that, in this episode, what characterizes and distinguishes China’s relations with Africa over time and despite changes in policy comes from the sphere of emotions. It is the ‘emotional bond’, in its different density variations, that *sticks* China and Africa together, and is inclusive of a range of emotions that pass the test of time: from anti-imperialist solidarity, to the conviviality that guarantees the desirable outcome of a business negotiation. Emotions have the power to hold together the old rhetoric and the new rhetoric (‘thin’, Alden and Large 2011, 26) without allowing it to collapse and, consequently, they also safeguard China’s own identity at home.

The article posits that a close reading of Chinese-language audiovisual media texts can offer unique insights into the evolving relationship between China and Africa, and reveal something new, by bringing to the surface something unexpected – like a ‘narrative of love’. This should be considered an aspect deserving of a far greater degree of attention within China-Africa Studies, which will doubtless lead to the production of significant future contributions

to the field.

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<sup>i</sup> All translations from Chinese to English are mine.

<sup>ii</sup> The adjective ‘postsocialist’ refers to ‘a society that was a Soviet-style socialist country before the end of the Cold War around 1990, and still maintains a socialist/communist political structure today but pursues capitalist economic practices in the era of globalization, as in the case of China’ (Lu 2007, 130).

<sup>iii</sup> In Chinese *Fengyu tongzhou* 风雨同舟 (literally: “In the same boat under wind and rain”). The episode is available at: <http://www.cctv.com/english/special/C16532/20061102/103075.shtml>

<sup>iv</sup> Literally: ‘Saint Healer from Heaven’. A synopsis of each episode is available at: [http://tvcity.tvb.com/drama/last\\_breakthrough/story/index.html](http://tvcity.tvb.com/drama/last_breakthrough/story/index.html)

<sup>v</sup> The official website is: <http://www.cctv.com/geography/theme/africa/index.shtml>

<sup>vi</sup> The documentary is available at: <http://tv.cntv.cn/videoset/C16889>

<sup>vii</sup> The programme is broadcast daily at 23:00, and rebroadcast the following day at 3:00, 7:00, 11:00, 15:00 and 19:00.

<sup>viii</sup> CCTV-9 is a Documentary Channel that was launched on 1 January 2011. It has a domestic Chinese-language edition and an international English-language edition. It shouldn’t be confused with the former CCTV-9 (or CCTV International News).

<sup>ix</sup> The documentary is available at: <http://tv.cntv.cn/videoset/C33343>

<sup>x</sup> The episode is available at: <http://tv.cntv.cn/video/C33343/c60a8c3629584b049b9726229a3c249c>

<sup>xi</sup> The other two crew leaders were the crosstalk performer Niu Qun 牛群 and the singer Zhu Zheqin 朱哲琴.

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