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How to cite:

Mohan, Giles; Lampert, Ben; Tan-Mullins, May and Atta-Ankomah, Richmond (2019). The (im)possibility of Southern theory: the opportunities and challenges of cultural brokerage in co-producing knowledge about China-Africa relations. In: Mawdsley, Emma; Fourie, Elsje and Nauta, Wiebe eds. Researching South-South Development Cooperation: The Politics of Knowledge Production. Rethinking Development. Routledge, pp. 12–26.

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<https://www.routledge.com/Researching-South-South-Development-Cooperation-The-Politics-of-Knowledge/Fourie-Mawdsley-Nauta>

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The (im)possibility of Southern theory: the opportunities and challenges of cultural brokerage in co-producing knowledge about China-Africa relations

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Introduction

The last decade has seen the expansion of an academic field and arena of often heated policy debate concerning ‘China-Africa’ relations (Alden and Large 2019). In the wider context of China’s intensified international engagements, this field of inquiry responds to the significantly increased involvement of a range of Chinese actors, including government agencies, state-owned enterprises, private companies and migrant entrepreneurs, in countries across Africa since the turn of the Millennium. China’s expanded engagements with African countries are rooted in a complex of factors including Chinese interests in natural resources and new markets for low-cost manufactured goods as well as African desires for alternative sources of development finance and an escape from ‘Western’ conditionalities (Alden 2007; Cheru and Obi 2010; Brautigam 2011; Power et al 2012; Mohan et al 2014). Consequently, ‘China-Africa’ relations, especially in terms of diplomacy, aid, trade, investment and, more recently, migration, have come to be seen as a prime arena for exploring the nature and potentials of ‘South-South’ cooperation (Mohan 2016) in what is heralded as an increasingly multi-polar world.

The rise of China and the expanded set of international relations this has brought into being has not only enabled the examination of alternative modes of international cooperation, but also presents new methodological opportunities and challenges. While China and many of the countries it increasingly engages, especially in Africa, tend to be framed as ‘Southern’, much of the theorisation of the relations between them has come from the global North, reinforcing long-standing North-South asymmetries in the production of what tends to be internationally most recognised as critical scholarship. This chapter reflects on some of our experiences of conducting research on ‘China-Africa’ relations while based in the UK and yet seeking to move beyond the entrenched international asymmetries of intellectual endeavour.

As a tripartite set of British, Ghanaian and Singaporean academic colleagues who have worked together to different degrees and in various configurations over a series of ‘China-Africa’ research projects, we discuss some of the challenges we have faced in putting together North-South research teams in which the production of theory about ‘China-Africa’ relations is a truly shared endeavour. We trace these challenges in part to what we tentatively suggest are the competing imperatives of the different institutional contexts in which we and our ‘Southern’ partners operate. Drawing on work on ‘Southern theory’, we highlight possibilities for negotiating these challenges, highlighting ideas of inter-cultural connection and mixing. This brings us to a discussion of ‘cultural brokerage’ as a potential means of creating connection in order to move closer to the meaningful co-production of theory with ‘Southern’ partners. Here we draw on our experience from one of our projects in which we worked with a ‘Southern’ partner who was able to operate as a cultural broker between British, African and Chinese contexts. Through this process, this cultural broker was able to decisively shape the theoretical claims we went on to make, although not necessarily in a way that overcame the established international asymmetries of academic knowledge production.

Researching China-Africa relations

It's early 2007 and Giles is in a pub in Leicester with two academic colleagues, both of whom work on Lusophone Africa and one of whom has just given a seminar. *There's lots of Chinese in Accra at the moment, what's it like in Maputo?* Giles asks. *Same* they answer. The Heritage Foundation, a conservative US think tank, is writing about China grabbing African oil (Heritage Foundation 2007) and the Left sees the US's newly formed AFRICOM as a vehicle to oppose Chinese encroachment into Africa (Volman, 2007). Debates about China-Africa relations are clearly polarised and data is lacking. *Fancy doing a project on 'China in Africa'?* One of the colleagues agrees and some weeks later the draft is coming along well, but Giles has hit a block. While we both had experience of working in different parts of Africa, China was new to us. *How do we do research on Chinese state institutions and firms? We don't speak Chinese and aren't Sinologists.* Giles' colleague responds: *There's a really good colleague where I work, who is Singaporean and speaks Chinese. She's called May and is keen to be involved. Great.* We get the grant from the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Fieldwork in China begins against a backdrop of US hawkishness and what the *New York Times* labels the 'Genocide Olympics' (Kristof 2008) campaign around Darfur. Here, the Sudanese government are accused of ethnic cleansing at the same time as receiving major Chinese investments in the run-up to China hosting the 2008 Olympic Games. Interviews with Chinese state institutions begin with 20 minutes of testing our motives and whether as UK government funded research we are out to criticise China. *It's social science we say we want to evaluate what's going on objectively. Mmmmh, OK* the Chinese officials respond, unconvinced.

The ESRC encourage networks to be built between the UK and 'rising power' scholars. It's 2010 and Giles and May are now working with a different UK-based colleague on a series of workshops to scope new research topics. The first workshop is being planned and we're partnering with a leading Chinese university. The contracts have been signed and all is good. The Dean of the faculty in China is really busy and he wants to hand the partnership to his junior colleague who did his PhD in the UK and speaks good English. *Should be fine and makes sense* we say. Our first three-way Skype call goes well and the date for the first workshop in Beijing is set. *But 'China in Africa' is not really my area of interest* the more junior Chinese colleague says *and I've never been to Africa. No problem, we're learning too.* The workshop planning rumbles on, mostly through email. Our Chinese colleague is unresponsive. Time is ticking. We send and re-send requests, which get increasingly desperate and somewhat pushy. *Stop being imperialist* he yells in email. We back off and resolve the issue. The workshop goes smoothly and attracts UK and Chinese academics, and representatives from some Chinese think-tanks and international NGOs based in China.

Another network member was from an international NGO that campaigns on, amongst other things, Chinese dams. They have a database and we draft a bid with them involving four country case studies of large hydropower projects. Giles is responsible for the case studies in Ghana and Nigeria. We need an academic partner so he writes to a friend and colleague in a West African university about possible involvement. *I'd like to* he says *but I don't know anything about China-Africa relations, beyond what I pick up in the press, or much about hydropower.* Giles gets back to his UK colleague who is leading the bid *He's not a China-Africa expert but is great at project managing research and can assemble a team.* We go with it as the bid deadline is fast

approaching. We get the project and need to draft a legal agreement. The drafts circulate between the UK-based researchers, our university's legal services sub-contractor and our colleagues in Africa. The contract states "All Arising Intellectual Property...in the Materials generated in the performance of the Services shall belong to the Open University". Giles objects *It's a collaboration, we produce stuff together*. They reply *it's easier to do it this way and then grant them a licence to use the knowledge generated*. The wording stays but we find ways to work around it.

In 2014, after a series of projects including one on Chinese business migrants in Ghana and Nigeria, a senior colleague who Giles has collaborated with has announced his retirement and they meet to chat about taking this work forward. Their discussion revolves around those first concerns – Africa's oil. Soon after they both get invited to a Department for International Development (DFID)-ESRC consultation on a programme on China-Africa Growth. In the sumptuous rooms of the British Academy in London the ESRC suggests some themes. It's frustrating. They are the same ones we variously suggested almost a decade ago. Clearly, we didn't communicate our findings well enough and the point that talking about 'China' as a single actor isn't helpful. *You also need to consider the value of 'the China model' for 'Africa' they say. But there's no one model. And how easily can you transfer one model to entirely different and diverse contexts* we protested. *That's your problem, but you have to show the value of the 'Chinese model'. And it's imperative you have Chinese partners to access this funding*. A UK-based Chinese scholar echoed my experience of the Dean delegating to someone else. *You won't necessarily get good social science simply by having a Chinese partner, they argue. Point taken, but you have to have a Chinese partner*, the funders insist.

With help from colleagues at another UK university, Giles identifies two strong Chinese partners and an Accra-based think-tank working on African energy policy. The team succeeds in getting a DFID-ESRC project on the activities of Chinese oil companies in Ghana, Nigeria and Sudan. At the inception meeting, the team reviews the scope and methodology. Giles stresses that the value of this project is the new data the team generates together on Chinese outward investment and the detailed processes through which Chinese oil firms enter African economies and work (or not) with local partners. The fieldwork in Ghana, Nigeria and Sudan is therefore key. Richmond, a recent PhD graduate from the development studies department at the Open University, is recruited as the research fellow on the project and brings extensive experience of conducting economic and development-related research not only in his home country of Ghana but also in other African countries. The fieldwork with indigenous oil sector actors in the case study countries is therefore in capable hands, allowing the Chinese partners to concentrate on engaging with the Chinese oil companies operating in these countries. But one Chinese professor announces that they won't be going to Africa. *No problem, but would be great to have a colleague who can go out* we urge. *We'll see*, the Chinese professor responds. Some months later we want to organise interviews in China with oil firms and ministries and assume our well-placed Chinese academic partners can help set these up as we agreed in the contract. But for the last two years Xi Jinping's anti-corruption drive has been in full flow and our Chinese partners are wary about working with 'foreigners'. *My institution won't host the workshop we had planned, they say, but you could do it at a hotel. Very well*, we concede. But this partner eventually withdraws and we have to find a new one. Our new partner is willing to come to the African case study countries but emails to say not only has he got to declare his travel plans for the coming year but is worried about 'safety' and he ends up making only a fleeting visit to

Lagos. During that brief trip, Richmond is also in Lagos, ostensibly to facilitate our Chinese colleague's meetings. But the Chinese partner's meeting with Chinese research participants is done alone, largely due to his uneasiness about the Chinese respondents' negative reactions towards a non-Chinese academic being part of the research team.

Doing Theory

These experiences of over a decade of working on China-Africa engagements has resulted in much of the 'critical' scholarship coming from the 'West' which reinforces the very intellectual structures that many of us seek to move beyond. Much of the theorisation that has been done from the projects described above – around geopolitics, African agency and enclaves – has been done by the UK-based researchers and academics. So, what we have found frustrating is the difficulties in co-producing critical theory around the political economy of China-Africa relations. This opens up a series of reflexive questions about what is meant by critical theory, and whether our respective locations in particular socio-cultural, political and institutional settings shapes our approaches to knowledge production.

In this section of the chapter we explore the tensions in producing theory that reflects Southern concerns. Our resolution is to see knowledge as produced from 'connection' in the sense that Gurminder Bhambra invokes (2014). This connectedness that involves an increasingly globalised China, and, arguably, greater scope for African agency, disrupts some of the spatial categories and power relations implicit in much post-colonial theory. It also forces us to consider the political-economy of research across different national settings, which shape how scholars relate (Collyer 2018), which we reflect on below. Methodologically it speaks to the possibilities of forms of 'cultural brokerage' that attempt to straddle and connect peoples, places and epistemologies, albeit without ever escaping the established power hierarchies of knowledge production. We discuss this in the following section and end by discussing one example of such cultural brokerage in our own research.

What is Southern Theory?

Our worries about how knowledge on China-Africa relations is produced echoes wider concerns around the essentially extractive nature of research on the global South by Northern researchers (Pieterse and Parekh 1995; Connell 2007; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; Bhambra and Santos 2017). Such structures are rooted in long-standing colonial processes, which Santos (2014) has termed 'epistemicide'. By this he refers to 'Unequal exchanges among cultures have always implied the death of the knowledge of the subordinated culture, hence the death of the social groups that possessed it' (p.92). Tilley (2017) likens it to 'piracy' which involves 'practices of 'raw' data extraction for processing into refined intellectual property' (p.27). The parallels with natural resources is not accidental since the data is processed or, to use a term from the literature on resource value chains, 'beneficiated' to produce theory. This clearly reasserts the inequalities between Northern researchers and both the subjects of their research and their erstwhile collaborators in Southern universities and research institutions. An implicit assumption is that theory is the ultimate goal of scholarship rather than other forms of analysis; something we return to below. Connell's (2007) use of the term 'Southern Theory' is used to focus attention on these centre-periphery relations but also to emphasise that the global South does produce theory and that all theory production sits in places (Roy 2016).

So, while the notion of Southern Theory remains a critique and normative ideal it does open debates about more ‘democratic’ or ‘inclusive’ forms of knowledge production (le Grange 2016). To produce new forms of knowledge is not simply about inversion or reversal (Pieterse and Parekh 1995), whereby a purely Southern episteme replaces a supposedly Western one, or where centuries of knowledge production are effectively erased in some spurious attempt to reach back to an older and more authentic folk knowledge. Rather, we need to focus on social processes as already and always constituted from connectedness. Bhambra and Santos (2017, 6) focus on historical connections ‘generated by processes of colonialism, enslavement, dispossession and appropriation’. This echoes Comaroff and Comaroff when discussing African modernity that ‘people across the continent have long made their lives; this partly in dialectical relationship with the Global North and its expansive imperium, partly with others of the same hemisphere, partly in localized enclaves’ (2012, 117).

As such these multiple connections and conjunctures are both temporal and spatial. Part of this is about taking seriously the lived realities of those in the global South; what Savransky (2017: 16) terms ‘existential justice’ or as Tilley (2017) quoting Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, 230) argues ‘How can research ever address our needs as indigenous peoples if our questions are never taken seriously?’ which is in Tilley’s terms a ‘field informed’ approach that is based on ethnography (Roy 2015). This opens up questions about the elevation of ‘theory’ to the pinnacle of intellectual endeavour. As we will see, many of our ‘Southern’ collaborators seem more interested in particular types of data and modes of analysis, which are underpinned by (usually) implicit theoretical assumptions, rather than creating ‘new’ theory. We all have multiple realities that shape our approaches, and the key is to understand and respect them.

Beyond post-colonial categories

As the recollection above of the chat in a Leicester pub suggested, an emerging reality was the economic and political rise of China. While much of the critique and deconstruction highlighted in the previous section is rooted in various forms of post-colonial critique we have struggled to use it directly to discuss China-Africa engagements and our privileged intellectual role in analysing it as UK-based researchers, which all the authors of this chapter were during most of the time they were involved in these projects. Raghuram *et al* (2014) capture this tension well

‘The altered global presence of Asia presents challenges to the spatial matrices underlying current thinking in postcolonial geography...the vectors of power that are analysed in postcolonial geography have often drawn unequally from development geographies and hence, have prioritized the global South/North distinction, albeit in quite complex ways....The dynamism and diversity of the global South, especially its manifestation in what has come to be known as Rising Asia, ruffles commonly accepted spatialities underlying postcolonial geographies (p.120).

This presence of Asia complicates the accepted binaries – the ‘abyssal line’ in Santos’ (2014) terms - and power relations of knowledge production where the critique has focused on the coloniser as western imperialist.

The rise of China clearly ‘ruffles’ the spatialities and epistemologies that we have been addressing and speaks to many of the practical problems we outlined earlier. China is

simultaneously ‘Southern’, ‘Northern’ and neither. Comaroff and Comaroff (2012, 127) point out that ‘there is much South in the North, much North in the South, and more of both to come in the future’; the first point refers to their argument that the precarity experienced in the global South is increasingly being experienced in the global North such that the modernity of the South is ‘ahead’ of that in the North though clearly not something to celebrate. This mixing across the ‘abyssal line’ speaks to the multiple connections of Bhambra’s sociology and unsettles a straightforward postcolonial critique which sees Western researchers as simply extracting knowledge from a less powerful South. China plays up its history of being colonised in certain instances, often as part of a wider discourse of ‘South-South’ development cooperation. At the same time China projects its growing power in ways that position Africa as a supplier of raw materials in much the same manner as Western powers have done for centuries. Yet we collaborate with Chinese scholars in wealthy Chinese universities with all the access to technology yet may be accused of being ‘imperialist’ when we push too hard.

This connection and mixing also unsettles nationally-centred categories which infuse our work, since the intersections of multiple social differences and situated histories play into any process, event or situation we choose to examine. Such connections produce less racially or nationally defined categories – ‘Chinese’ capitalism or ‘African’ agency or ‘Western’ values – while also retaining the power of racial and national boundary-making and their effects. Such a situation is captured by Ong (2008, 120) where she notes “We need to view space as multiple and contingent, always shifting in response to flows and processes of situated articulation and disarticulation. New spaces overlap but do not always match up with given administrative units”. This idea is messier than the spatial ontologies of much postcolonial theory but is more useful in seeking to understand the situated processes of multiple connections between China, Africa and the West.

The political economy of knowledge production in Chinese, UK and African contexts

Tilley’s (2017) metaphor of piracy is developed through a focus on bioprospecting where genetic material from the global South is commodified for circulation and use by Western corporations. As such she urges us to focus not simply on questions of epistemology and culture but to ‘consider the political economy of knowledge, and thus of extractive academic tendencies’ (p. 28). Many of the practical issues we raised earlier derive from the different political-economies in which different actors are embedded – as Connell (2007) pointed out theory is made somewhere and we are dealing with the triangular relationship of the UK, particular African countries and China. Collyer (2018) usefully argues that knowledge production is not absolutely rooted in national contexts but operates through ‘multiple circuits’ that are structured around different traditions, epistemologies and shaped by power relations. So how does the political economy of higher education and research in our constitutive territories play into the circuits of knowledge production about China-Africa? Our response to this is personal and perceptual, and so necessarily tentative.

Our sense is that there are distinct institutional and cultural contexts of being a Chinese academic. The tenure and promotion track seems to encourage certain forms of knowledge creation such as expert reports to state bodies rather than English-language, peer-reviewed journal papers. As broadly qualitative scholars we have also struggled to get our Chinese and some African colleagues to see such data as ‘proper’ data and they therefore tend to be more inclined to collaborate when they can contribute to

quantitative analysis. This speaks to a wider issue of ‘evidence’ and policy influence that is more global in nature. Legitimate evidence to influence policy makers is often seen to be ‘hard data’ rather than qualitative and perceptual which necessarily funnels researchers who aspire to shape policy into such forms of data analysis. Yet the finer grained quantitative data needed to model things like local impacts on development is simply lacking in many African countries. And this is compounded by an unwillingness of some of our Chinese colleagues to come to Africa to undertake detailed ethnographic work, or even semi-structured interviewing with Chinese businesses. Latterly the further centralisation of state authority under Xi Jinping has made Chinese scholars based in China warier of collaborating with non-Chinese colleagues. While Chinese scholars based outside China clearly have more scope to be critical, the pressure to have China-based Chinese colleagues, that organisations like the ESRC push, means that more independently critical scholarship is difficult.

In both Ghana and Nigeria, two of the African countries in which we have been most engaged in our China-Africa research, the university sector was hammered by the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the 1980s which saw huge outflows of intellectuals. Many of the best social scientists either emigrated or set up think-tanks to capture donor money. As such there is often more of a consultancy culture to research where collaboration in international research projects is one way to augment still meagre salaries as well as opening the possibility of international publication, though what and where it is published seems to be less important. The ruffling of accepted categories that a connected sociology demands was also at play in our West African research, and questions categories like ‘Africa’. In the African context, where interpersonal trust appears weak and the independence of academics and think tanks is contested, the role of the local research partner as a cultural broker can be complex. During Richmond’s data collection in Nigeria and Ghana for the research on Chinese oil investments, the research participants in Nigeria were more receptive to him and readier to cooperate than their counterparts in his home country, Ghana. In Nigeria, he managed to arrange interview appointments at short notice and with relatively high success rates compared to what happened in Ghana. Here, being a fellow Ghanaian was a disadvantage in that Ghanaian respondents were wary of Richmond’s own networks and influence while Nigerian respondents assumed he was not part of the Nigerian oil scene and therefore a ‘neutral’ observer.

In the UK, we speak English which has become the de facto ‘universal’ academic language (Collyer 2018; Hultgren 2014) which means our need to speak ‘other’ languages is less pressured. This stems back to colonial connections and while we disavow extractive forms of knowledge production, we are embedded in these unequal relations as UK-based researchers for most of the time the research under discussion was conducted. The Research Excellence Framework, introduced in 2014 to succeed the Research Assessment Exercise first introduced in 1986, grades and ranks the work of UK-based academics, and pushes for research to be ‘original’ and cutting edge which means finding novel theoretical takes on global issues and valorising researchers’ contribution to knowledge. And the geopolitical anxiety about the ‘rise’ of China (and other Southern powers) has seen UK research councils pushing collaborations with emerging power academics as a form of soft power diplomacy. It also means the UK research councils have been active in funding projects from which we have been lucky enough to benefit. But this does mean that UK-based academics have been the principal investigators and so control the funds and initiate contractual relationships with

erstwhile ‘Southern’ collaborators which functions to cement a power differential and who ‘owns’ the resulting intellectual property.

Knowledge production through cultural brokerage

So far we have argued that knowledge creation can be extractive and is rooted in the political-economy and epistemological sites from which we work. But things are not so bleak and our projects have, in different ways, fomented collaborations between Western, African and Chinese researchers which are part and parcel of the diverse and variegated relationships emerging in the space of ‘China-Africa’ studies. Our own analysis tends to focus on the aid projects, trade and investment relations and migration flows without reflecting on our own practices as connectors and brokers. But the ‘field-informed’ research that Tilley (2017) recommends is based on being ‘relational, co-creational and grounded’.

Despite the many frustrations we have encountered, the tripartite teams of African, Chinese and British researchers we have been involved in have had some breakthroughs but these have generally required ‘cultural brokerage’ of one sort or another. While the literature on ‘cultural brokers’ has tended to emphasise that brokers themselves may be manipulative rather than facilitative of connection, we explore the enabling role we believe they have played in our research. The cultural brokerage literature can also be accused of reifying culture (de Jong 2018; Hinderaker 2002) but we argue that recognising more fluid and relational notions of culture makes it possible to see cultural brokerage as a creative process in which both the broker and the actors with whom they facilitate interaction play creative roles. Cultural brokerage therefore offers opportunities in seeking to negotiate the challenges of conducting research on China-Africa relations in ways that involve meaningful co-production of knowledge with ‘Southern’ partners. However, we also need to recognise that there remain real limitations to the extent to which cultural brokerage can enable research to transcend the power relations entrenched in circuits of academic knowledge production.

We explore these potentials and limitations through our experiences of one of the China-Africa research projects mentioned above; that focusing on the nature and outcomes of contemporary Chinese migration to Ghana and Nigeria. As we discuss below, this project was fraught with the kinds of challenges outlined above related to a British academic seeking to research across African and Chinese contexts. These challenges were only overcome, at least in the sense of being able to generate meaningful data to complete the project, by working with someone who could effectively mediate between British, Chinese, and particular African cultural identities and therefore be considered a cultural broker. The sociologist Mario Diani (2013, n.p.) claims, “In its most basic terms, brokerage refers to the mechanism whereby an actor acts as an intermediary between two other actors that are not directly linked, thus creating a new line of communication and exchange”. Significantly, the anthropologist Johan Lindquist (2015, 870) develops this understanding by highlighting that cultural brokerage is not in any way a ‘neutral’ process, arguing that “the broker is a specific type of middleman, mediator, or intermediary. Most generally, the broker is a human actor who gains something from the mediation of valued resources that he or she does not directly control, which shall be distinguished from a patron who controls valued resources, and a go-between or a messenger, who does not affect the transaction”. Below, we explore how such gains took shape in our tripartite research project and how the broker involved influenced the ‘transaction’ and its outcomes in fundamental ways.

Most of the work on cultural brokerage comes from ethno-historical studies of colonial societies, focusing on the relations between colonisers and the colonised (de Jong 2018). In such work, cultural brokers are identified in both settler and indigenous communities, but with time intermediaries between colonisers and colonised were seen to emerge from mixed heritages, religious conversion and the colonial education and administrative systems. As de Jong argues, their contacts with, positions of trust in, and linguistic and cultural knowledge of both settler and indigenous communities put cultural brokers in a privileged position. The American historian Eric Hinderaker (2002, 358) argues that “the most effective brokers [...] were exposed to hybrid cultural influences for long periods of time, and gained through their experiences a unique ability to perform a variety of cross-cultural tasks”. As Johan Lindquist (2015, 870) points out, cultural brokers were “often multilingual and comfortable in multiple settings”. But a key point is that the broker’s role exceeded linguistic translation and extended to what Hinderaker (2002, 358) calls ‘more complex forms of intermediation’ such as facilitating relationships and interpreting concepts. It is these qualities that underpin the creative potential of cultural brokerage as well as the recent interest in its role in contemporary contexts such as international migrants and diasporas acting as intermediaries for international development projects in their countries of origin (de Jong 2018). As the sociologists Katherine Stovel and Lynette Shaw (2012, 140) explain, “brokerage has the capacity to ease social interaction” and brokers can “make sense of the world for us”.

It was in the search for someone who could make at least some sense of the worlds experienced by Chinese migrants in Ghana and Nigeria that Giles came to recruit Ben to the research fellow position on this project. Ideally, Giles needed someone who had worked in Ghana and/or Nigeria and spoke Chinese. He recruited Ben who had worked in Nigeria for extended periods since 2000, but he could not speak Chinese and there was little prospect of him learning to by the time fieldwork needed to commence. Nonetheless, Ben set off on an initial fieldtrip to Lagos and made some progress with finding contacts on the Nigerian side of the Nigeria-China relationship as well as among some members of the long-established Hong Kong Chinese community in the city who spoke perfect English and often felt a cultural connection to the UK. But for the project to fulfil its objectives, it was necessary to find a more direct way to engage with the generally more recent and larger scale mainland Chinese migration to Nigeria and Ghana.

It was in the course of making contacts on the Nigerian side of Nigeria-China relations that Ben met Rosemary (a pseudonym), a middle-aged Nigerian woman who had recently left a major Chinese multinational to establish her own consultancy company. In terms of the brokerage capabilities outlined above and with the needs of our research project in mind, Rosemary can be seen as a formidable cultural broker. Having received her school education in the Nigerian system, which as a colonial legacy was still very much modelled on the British system, and with close relatives and regular visits to the UK, she found it very easy to relate to Ben, what a British academic was trying to achieve, and how he wanted to go about doing so. But while her father was working in China in the mid-1980s, she had also completed her degree in Chinese language and literature at a top Chinese university. Furthermore, since returning to Nigeria from China soon after graduation, she had worked with or for Chinese companies operating in Nigeria and Ghana and visited China regularly. So, Rosemary is not only fluent in

Chinese with a keen understanding of Chinese cultural heritage and work cultures but also has an incredible set of Chinese connections in Nigeria. She also happens to have a very friendly, open and engaging personality able to put new contacts at ease.

Enthusiastically taking on the role of a consultant on our project, Rosemary simply transformed the research – the quantity, range and depth of data we collected far exceeded anything we could have achieved without her involvement. But critically she also helped Ben understand much more about the data than he ever could have hoped, always contextualising it in terms of her understanding of Chinese social and cultural trends and enabling Ben to connect with our Chinese research participants and appreciate their experiences in a way he simply wouldn't have been able to achieve on his own. She helped Ben develop a real sense of empathy and connection with our Chinese respondents, enabling us to explore shared experiences, such as our position as foreigners in Ghana and Nigeria, our educational histories and aspirations, and the pressures of making a secure life in our increasingly competitive home societies.

Rosemary also has an extensive range of contacts with Ghanaians and Nigerians who are somehow connected to or affected by the Chinese presence and she was able to connect Ben to a far greater range of their voices than he would have been able to access on his own. This helped us to get a much more rounded and nuanced sense of the often-heated local debates about 'China in Africa', highlighting not only the tensions and conflicts that have attracted so much media attention, particularly in the 'West', but also the emergence of more cooperative, convivial and mutually beneficial relations (Lampert and Mohan 2014). It was also through these voices, especially via Rosemary's contacts with fellow Nigerians, as well as Ghanaians, who had, like her, reached-out and forged their own links with Chinese actors and shaped Chinese activities in their home countries, that African agency in China-Africa relations came through much more strongly than it might otherwise have done, becoming another of the key themes emerging from our research (Mohan and Lampert 2013).

It is clear, then, that Rosemary enabled Ben, as a British researcher with no Chinese language skills and very little specialised knowledge of Chinese social and cultural norms, to have a much broader and deeper engagement with Chinese migrants in Ghana and Nigeria, and locals connected to or affected by their presence, than he would have been able to achieve without her support. This can therefore be seen as a classic case of cultural brokerage, with Rosemary's role exemplifying the creative opportunities presented by cultural brokers. However, the literature expresses a strong and long-standing ambivalence towards brokers.

As Stovel and Shaw (2012) note, one of the central themes going back to the sociology of Georg Simmel is that brokerage not only has wider benefits such as easing social interaction but also frequently provides personal gains for the brokers themselves, enabling them to further their own social mobility and power. Exemplifying this, the anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain (1974, 148, quoted in Lindquist 2015, 871) describes the broker as "a professional manipulator of people and information who brings about communication for a profit". From such perspectives, brokers are seen to have "mixed loyalties" (de Jong 2018); in Eric Wolf's (1956, 1076, quoted in *ibid.*) terms they are "Janus-like, they face in two directions at once".

Rosemary certainly gained personally from her involvement in our research. She was paid more than our university's standard rate for research consultants and when we met, she had just left a big Chinese company and had plans to set up a Nigeria-China consultancy; her work with us enabled this to happen. She ended-up with further work through our project because some of the Chinese and Nigerian contacts she reconnected with needed assistance with their Nigeria-China businesses. And as noted above, she was also able to shape the stories we told about the Chinese presence in Ghana and Nigeria. These were stories she was passionately committed to being told, and ones that highlighted the local embeddedness and benefits of the Chinese communities more than most coverage, even if she was also happy to pursue the more contested dimensions of the Chinese presence. Rosemary did discourage a few interesting lines of research, such as towards one of the major, long-standing Hong Kong Chinese industrial groups in Nigeria due to her family connections to it and the influence of the owner, who she felt, quite reasonably, could undermine our progress if he found out about our research and was suspicious of it. But she was very open and explicit about this and shared lots of background information in these cases, even if it was not to be directly quoted. Ultimately, although Rosemary was very happy with the stories we told through the research, she did not want to take the risk of being explicitly linked to them for fear of damaging her relationships with her contacts and she had no interest in academic publication. While we could understand her position, it was nonetheless rather uncomfortable as the erasure of her absolutely central role in the research smacked of the entrenched, extractive mode of North-South knowledge generation we wanted to transcend.

Conclusion

Our use of cultural brokerage to enable our research in a situation in which we were, at best, only very partially equipped to operate has undeniably reproduced some of the most problematic patterns of Northern research practice in Southern contexts. We would argue, however, that cultural brokerage did in this instance facilitate a greater level of North-South co-production than would otherwise have been the case. An important criticism that can be made of the cultural brokerage literature is that it often works with very fixed, 'containerised' notions of culture, in which cultures are presented as distinct 'units' with clear boundaries between them (de Jong 2018; Hinderaker 2002). But it has been argued that if we recognise more fluid and relational notions of culture in which contact is constitutive of cultural identities, brokerage can be seen as a creative process in which, to quote Eric Hinderaker (2002, 369), "brokers help to constitute their cultures through the process of mediation".

We think that this is, in many ways, exactly what Rosemary did, and the 'cultures' that she helped to articulate were profoundly mixed. Our Chinese respondents often called her by the Chinese name she was given during her time at university in China, and explicitly framed her as a fellow Chinese. Among other things, Rosemary's ascribed Chinese-ness meant that a number of Chinese respondents expressed that they could say things to and in front of her that they would not feel comfortable saying in the presence of other Nigerians. But it also pointed to a sense of much more developed and embedded Chinese-Ghanaian/Nigerian social and cultural mixes created by Chinese and West Africans alike, which stood in stark contrast to the generally confrontational 'China-Africa' binary presented in much commentary. It was this sense that came to characterise the 'findings' of our research and so, in this regard at least, Rosemary certainly co-produced the stories we told and enabled our Chinese and West African

respondents to play a much bigger part in their production than would have been possible otherwise. The stories highlight the cultural connection and mixing that can underpin apparently binary ‘South-South’ relations and suggest that embracing this helps us to better understand these relations.

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