

Color around the Globe: Langston Hughes and Black Internationalism in China

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For the last 20 years, half writer and half vagabond, I have traveled from here to yonder around and back again, up and down the African coast, through Russia, through Asia, back and forth across America and, in general, from pillar to post. One thing I learned is that Alabama and Africa have the same problems. Stalingrad and Chicago fight the same gangsters. Two 14-year-old boys are lynched at Shubuta Bridge and Harlem shudders—also Chungking.

Langston Hughes (*Langston* 20)

In the summer of 1923, Langston Hughes was aboard the S. S. Malone as part of the ship's crew sailing for the west coast of Africa. As the ship passed through the town of Sandy Hook in New Jersey, he took all his books out on deck, except Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and tossed them overboard. Just a year prior, Hughes, too, tossed away his undergraduate studies at Columbia University. "I didn't like Columbia," he recalls in *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (1940), "nor the students, nor anything I was studying" (85). Above all, it was the racial prejudice he experienced that prompted his departure. It was perhaps at this point of his life when he realized that the best lesson he could receive in order to remedy "the stupidities of color-prejudice" was not from an Ivy-League education but rather to see the different races beyond the borders of the United States (98).

In an unpublished draft of his second autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey* (1956), Hughes wrote that his ambition was "to visit all the dark countries of the world, all those lands where live Negroes or Asiatics. Being an American Negro who grew up in a country predominantly white, it always intrigued me to look into lands predominantly colored" (15). Before he turned twenty-two, in addition to Mexico and Europe, Hughes had visited Africa, which, in David Chioni Moore's words, was "an extremely rare event for African Americans of that era, who did not, generally speaking, look to Africa for cultural inspiration" (50). More unusual still was for Hughes to visit not only Haiti, Cuba, and the Soviet Union in the decade that followed but also the Far East and the heart of Shanghai.

Hughes acquired a valuable lesson at Columbia as a freshman from his friendship with a Chinese classmate. As Arnold Rampersad tells us, Hughes was “closest to a Chinese fellow from Honolulu, Yee Sing Chun, who took him to Chinatown and passed on a smattering of Mandarin” (53). Chinatown and Mandarin aside, in his writings, Hughes began to draw on the common experience of racism that plagued the Chinese and African Americans. At this time, Hughes adopted a Chinese pen name, Lang-Hu (or Langhu), and wrote four poems published in the April and May issues of the *Columbia Spectator*. Faith Berry believes that the pen name sounds phonetically like “Lang Who?” reflecting “the way Hughes felt as a Columbia student—unsure, unknown and unwelcome” (29). Tellingly, by assuming a Chinese persona, Hughes showed interest in giving voice to people who were often fetishized, ostracized, and exoticized in the American political and cultural scene. As Hughes recalled in *The Big Sea*, “Like me, Chun, the Chinese boy, didn’t like the big University either. . . . Here nobody paid attention to him, and the girls wouldn’t dance with him at dances. . . . Nobody asked him to join a frat and nobody asked me, but I didn’t expect anyone to” (83). The parallel histories of oppression shared by the Chinese and African American communities that Hughes recognized early in his writing career would continue to have a lasting impact on his body of work. When he visited China in 1933, Hughes would see realities that ran counter to the racialized caricatures widely propagated through the American popular media at a time when the Chinese Exclusion Act was in full effect.

Although Shanghai was a multicultural metropolis at the time, it was still a rare event to see a black person there. Hughes’s visit gave voice to the complex history of black America, and it underscored the relevance of African American writers to the Chinese literary canon. In the early and unlikely scenario of Afro-Chinese encounters, Hughes’s experiences in China unravel the complexity of his conception of “color around the globe,” as he so characterizes his trips to the East in *I Wonder as I Wander*. In what sociopolitical circumstance did Hughes travel to China? What ignorance of China in the American and African American worlds was he trying to repair? How did Chinese writers and intellectuals characterize Blackness in the period during which Hughes made his visit? What internationalist vision did he advocate through his encounters in China? In addressing these questions, my focus is not to chronologize Hughes’s relationship with China or critique how a particular work of his is translated into Chinese. Rather, I examine how interwar Shanghai provides a particular space of encounter for Hughes to envision an alternative universe that is not governed by Euro-American-centric globality and capitalistic economies.

In exploring Hughes’s Chinese visit and reception in the 1930s, I reveal a more complete picture of Afro-Chinese alliances by interrogating the mutual influences between the Chinese and African American literary communities in a rigorously transnational framework. I argue that Hughes’s internationalism is more than the

interplay between his international travels—in this case, to China—and how they influence or are articulated in his body of work as they connect different spatial and temporal points of crossing. Equally fundamental to the arc of my argument is how his internationalism *functions* in and through interwar Shanghai. As detailed in the discussion that follows, Hughes asserts agency with the kind of internationalism that not only debunked widespread racialized Chinese notions toward Blackness but also helped intellectuals he met to envision possibilities of an Afro-Asian alliance that would come to more visible fruition with the later visits of W. E. B. and Shirley Graham Du Bois, Viki Garvin, and Robert and Mabel Williams, among others, during the Mao era.

Hughes's trip to China had a major impact on his internationalist thinking at a time when his body of work was deeply entrenched in the framework of communist proletarianism. Whether fiction or nonfiction, his literature in the 1930s was heavily influenced by the directions of the Communist Party in the United States and the Comintern. His poems such as "Good Morning, Revolution" (1932), "One More S in the U.S.A." (1934), "Roar, China!" (1937), and "Ballad of Lenin" (1938) reflect his advocacy for the kind of democratic ideals that aimed to connect colonial populations and working classes across the globe. In *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism between the Wars* (1999), William Maxwell identifies the "inseparability" of the histories of African American letters and American communism, which he believes "qualifies among the least understood features of modern black writing" (2). Likewise, in *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Poetry, 1930–1946* (1999), James Smethurst highlights the general assumption among scholars of African American studies and literature toward "the disjunction between modernism and 'proletarian' (and Popular Front) literature" (5). The disjunction, he continues, "also works within a larger discourse that poses 'modernism' (read 'serious' or 'universal' literature) against 'proletarian' or 'social realist' (read 'hack' or 'provincial') writing" (6). To this end, Hughes's internationalist writing provides a resourceful platform through which links between African American literary modernism, American communism, and proletariat literature can be reestablished.

As Smethurst remarks, the period during which Hughes visited China and the 1940s was characterized by "an internationalism on the part of African American writers that was unprecedented in its scope." The Comintern, he argues, played an indispensable role in fostering "a practical literary connection of 'oppressed peoples'" around the world (8). In the past two decades, in addition to Smethurst and Maxwell, scholars such as Alan Wald and Mary Helen Washington have filled important gaps in the study of the American literary left. Their works bring to the fore a number of leftist American writers, including Hughes, that otherwise are marginalized in conversations on American literary history during the Cold War era. Kate Baldwin and Steven S. Lee, in particular,

highlight the indispensable role that the Soviet Union plays in Hughes's internationalist thinking. Nevertheless, due to the importance the Soviet Union holds in communist revolutions at the time, the impact of China on Hughes's work—and on the literary left more generally—tends to get overshadowed.

Despite the brevity of Hughes's sojourn, China continued to inform his black internationalist position in the African American literary community until his passing. As Luo Lianggong argues, Hughes's poetry on China, in particular, "uses the imagined 'Chinese' metonym to globalize his own particular experience as an African American within the United States context and to link it to the then-contemporary experience of a Chinese revolutionary reality" (111). His later poems such as "Song of the Refugee Road" (1940), "Little Song" (1948), "Consider Me" (1951–52), "In Explanation of Our Times" (1955), and "Birmingham Sunday" (1963) underpin Hughes's sustained belief in the inevitability of China as a major player in the worldwide call for proletarian revolution. If the twentieth century is what Andrew F. Jones and Nikhil Pal Singh characterize as the "Afro-Asian century," then Hughes had a significant—and still much underexplored—part to play in setting into motion an unprecedented wave of encounters between African American and Chinese writers, intellectuals, and politicians that were to follow after his visit in 1933 and well into the 1970s.

In 1999, Robin D. G. Kelley and Elizabeth Esch highlighted the pervasive influence of communist China and Maoism on the black liberation movement. In 2004, Bill V. Mullen comprehensively defined the field of Afro-Asian studies. Mullen and Fred Ho pushed Afro-Asian dialogues further by discussing the African and Asian diasporas in the East from as early as the 1800s and Afro-Asian collaborations in politics and the arts during the civil-rights era and beyond. While Diane Fujino, Etsuko Taketani, Helen Heran Jun, and Moon-Ho Jung contribute invaluable insights by focusing primarily on African American and Asian American dialogues and historic relations, Robeson Taj Frazier, Marc S. Gallicchio, Gao Yunxiang, and Keisha A. Brown underscore the impact of China on shaping the transnational contours of Afro-Asian alliances. The burgeoning scholarship on Afro-Asian studies over the past two decades has brought to the fore an emerging ground of inquiry that has yet to explore the Chinese literary scenes and the period before the Bandung era.

When Hughes first set sail for the Soviet Union in 1932, China was by no means visible on his travel agenda until his eleven-month Soviet trip drew to a close. Prior to his trip to China, Hughes spent an extended period of time in the Soviet Union to help make a film featuring black steel plant workers in Birmingham, Alabama. Despite his initial excitement, Hughes soon realized the inability of the director and the screenwriter to grasp the fundamental dynamics of the American South. As he recalls in *I Wonder as I Wander*, the director, Karl Yunghans, had never been to the United States nor known any "Negroes other than Africans" (79). Among other insurmountable challenges, Hughes remarks,

“was a script improbable to the point of ludicrousness” and a project that amounted to nothing but a “complete fantasy” (76). On the film’s failed production, Hughes decided to continue his journey, this time to Asia. Frustrated with the film crew’s incognizance of the historical and cultural nuances of the African American experience, he turned to China to experiment with the Soviet limitations as he continued to address the questions of race in the international context.

To make sense of Hughes’s sojourn vis-à-vis the perception of race in the Shanghai literary scene at the time, it is instrumental to revisit, if only briefly, the historical context in which Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) was introduced in China just a few decades prior. The author of this novel, whom Abraham Lincoln famously referred to as “the little lady who made this big war” (qtd. in Weinstein 1), perhaps would never have expected her work to also stir in China unprecedented condemnation of American slavery when it was translated in 1901. The significance of Lin Shu’s edition of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is not only that it was the first Chinese translation of any American novel but also that it resonated with a wide readership during a tumultuous turn of the century. Having suffered from a series of humiliating defeats in the long nineteenth century—the First Opium War (1839–42), the Second Opium War (1856–60), and the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95)—China was wrestling with widespread poverty, severe droughts, and threats of imperialism and intervention by missionary activities. As a result of the late Qing government’s inability to cope with these issues on domestic and international fronts, the Boxer Uprising broke out in 1899.

Comprised primarily of discontented peasants and laborers, the Boxers destroyed Christian churches and homes of both missionaries and Chinese converts to Christianity. Their destruction eventually led to a large sum of indemnities that China had to settle with what came to be known as the Eight-Nation Alliance: Britain, Russia, France, Italy, Germany, the United States, Austria-Hungary, and Japan. The subsequent signing of the Boxer Protocol, tellingly, coincided with the year when *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was translated into Chinese. The desperate situation at the turn of the century culminated with the continued plight of Chinese coolie laborers overseas. By the time Stowe’s work was translated in 1901, the Chinese at home had become increasingly aware of the oppressive conditions that beset Chinese immigrant workers in the United States and elsewhere. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* not only provided Chinese readers a glimpse of the history of American slavery but also how Chinese indentured workers were likely treated at the time. In the preface to the Chinese translation of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Lin Shu remarks:

Recently, what had been the way to treat the black slaves is gradually becoming the way to treat the yellow people. A scorpion that cannot fully release its poison must gnaw on shrubs and plants to vent its venom. People who later come to touch the

withered stalks will be paralyzed even if they do not die from it. Must we the yellow people touch those dead stalks? Our nation, though rich in natural resources, is not being developed. With their poor and meager livelihood, people cannot sustain themselves. Thus they start to work and live on the American continent, even envying its way of life. American statisticians, worried about the drainage of capital, cruelly mistreat the Chinese migrant workers and ban their entry. The gross abuse suffered by the yellow people is in some instances even greater than what the black people endured. (qtd. in Tsu 57)

As Jing Tsu explains, Lin “was known for the emotional appeal of his translations” (57). Lin’s statement, “[t]he gross abuse suffered by the yellow people is in some instances even greater than what the black people endured,” might have undermined the calamity endured by the black slaves collectively, but his goal was the same as Stowe’s: win “unsolicited tears of our readers” (Tsu 59).

Slavery, in Lin’s portrayal, is a contagious and poisonous disease that ought to be eradicated. Nevertheless, Lin’s immediate and ultimate concern seems to be that of China falling into the imperialistic hands of another nation rather than the inhumanity of black slavery itself. As Tsu argues, “That the yellows might end up repeating the fates of the ‘inferior’ races was a feared possibility that weighed heavily on the literary as well as the intellectual imagination” (60). Despite the connection that Lin makes between black slaves and Chinese coolie labor in the United States, he does not hint at the necessity of Afro-Chinese solidarity to fight white hegemony but is instead more fearful that the Chinese would be subsumed like black slaves, leading to “the imminent death of the yellow race” (57).

Grappling with shaken nationhood amid an ever-weakening empire, Chinese intellectuals and political activists effectively used Stowe’s novel as a wake-up call for national strengthening against foreign invasions. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was widely circulated and studied in China, and its tremendous popularity subsequently inspired a wave of Chinese translations of American literary works, including the short stories, essays, poems, and novels of James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, and Sinclair Lewis. None of the literary works translated was authored by an African American, nor did any of the works deal primarily with American slavery.

Ironically, due to the popularity that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* enjoyed, the image of African Americans remained as the inferior racial Other. The “New Negro” images advocated by Booker T. Washington and Du Bois, however conflicting they were, were not widely circulated in China at the time of Lin’s translation, nor was Alain Locke’s influential depiction of the “New Negro” two decades later. As the Chinese scholar Liang Yaping later wrote, “the author created Tom as a character to embody perfect moral fibre within the framework of Christianity, but he is not a ‘new Negro.’ Tom does not have the leadership to rise against

the whites and fight for the rights of his people” (188). *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, in other words, arguably foreclosed imagined possibilities of Afro-Asian solidarity, but it certainly lent Hughes a fundamental platform through which to problematize the racial caricatures articulated in Stowe’s work as he encountered the literary scene in Shanghai.

Hughes documented his trip to China along with his Japanese tour under the section “Color around the Globe” in *I Wonder as I Wander*. The chapters that he wrote on Shanghai delineate both the enchantment and revulsion that he felt toward the metropolis. Fascinated by the pulsating scenes of skyscrapers, neon lights, nightclubs, jazz bands, and air-cooled movie theaters, Hughes was at the same time horrified by the dangerous political environment. The “hair-raising stories” circulating around the “multi-racial city,” he remarks, “would put Chicago at its wildest to shame” (246). The multicultural scenes that Hughes described involved foreign warships anchoring at the ports of Shanghai. While the British employed Sikhs from India as guards of various sorts in the International Settlement, the French imported Annamites from Indochina to direct traffic, and the Japanese had their own unofficial police “muscling in ever more aggressively on Shanghai’s various rackets.” In 1933, the Shanghai streets were so “wide open to all sorts of vices and corruptions” that they resembled “an armed camp.” Against the chaotic scenes of Shanghai were incidences of child kidnapping, disfigured babies being rented out for street begging, child labor abuse in Chinese factories, and adult prostitution with women “of all nationalities from White Russians to Japanese, French, English, or Chinese” (247).

Nonetheless, what was most gripping about Shanghai for Hughes was the infamously dangerous environment for leftist writers at the time. While it was “a haven for radical intellectuals and home to the active underground Chinese Communist Party,” in Etsuko Taketani’s words, it was “simultaneously an environment notoriously hostile to Communists and Communist sympathizers” (“Spies” 29). It was not uncommon to see left-wing writers and students being arrested, imprisoned, and even assassinated for “harbouring ‘dangerous thoughts’ against Chiang Kai-Shek” (Hughes, *I* 249). In her biography of Agnes Smedley, Ruth Price estimates that “Nearly a quarter of a million citizens, mostly left-wing workers and trade union activists, had been killed since Chiang turned on the Communists in April of 1927” (174). The threat also extended to expatriate writers residing in China. In fact, a majority of what Hughes removed from the early drafts of *I Wonder as I Wander* were details concerning the controversy surrounding Harold Isaacs, an American journalist who ran an English weekly, *China Forum*, based in Shanghai.

At the urging of Agnes Smedley, who Hughes met in Moscow, Hughes reached out to Isaacs once he had arrived in Shanghai. On his first visit with Isaacs, Hughes stumbled on the recent wreckage of the American journalist’s office by gangs from the Nationalist Party. Isaacs’s paper was vocal in its opposition

against not only Chiang but also the French and British politics in China. As Hughes wrote later in *China Forum*, Isaacs's office was smashed up "without interference from the European officials of the International Settlement, or any attempt on the part of the International or Chinese police to stop it. The China Forum was a severe critic of the British and the French in Shanghai, so it could expect little help from their officials." Hughes continued: "[W]riters in Shanghai do not live—they are killed! This is not a figure of speech. It is true. They are shot or strangled or beaten to death" ("From" 5). In publishing with the *China Forum* despite its associated risks, Taketani argues, "Hughes joined in the struggle to defend the pro-Communist literary front and the revolution in China (and the world)" (32).

During his Chinese sojourn, one influential leftist writer that Hughes wanted to meet was Lu Xun, who during Hughes's visit was being sought by Chiang's Nationalist Party and therefore could not receive Hughes publicly. Nevertheless, this did not stop other leftist writers from hosting a reception for Hughes. In less than a week after Hughes's arrival in Shanghai on 13 July 1933, the League of Leftist Writers, together with the literary organizations *Les Contemporains*, *Chun Wai News Agency*, and *Literary Club* jointly organized a tea reception to welcome the first African American writer to town. Present at the reception were Hughes, Isaacs, and Chinese writers Fu Donghua, Hong Shen, Zheng Zhenfeng, Huang Yuan, Shi Zhecun, Lou Shiyi (who moderated the session), and Yao Ke (who helped with translation during the meeting). The event was published in various literary magazines in Shanghai. *Les Contemporains*, for instance, on the first page of the August issue printed a portrait of Hughes and a photograph of his signature with the handwritten date, 13 July 1933. Above these two items was a picture of some of the writers sitting at a roundtable discussion. *Wenxue*, likewise, featured a detailed account of the meeting titled "Xiu Si Zai Zhongguo" ("Hughes in China") written by Fu Donghua under the pen name Wu Shih.

In the article, Fu pointed to the different stages through which Hughes "established" his status as a writer in the black literary canon. He translated and discussed works that contributed to Hughes's rising reputation, including his poems "The Weary Blues" (1926) and "Our Spring" (1933), his famous essay "The Negro Art and the Racial Mountain" (1926), his poetry volume *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), and his first novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930). While Fu's article made the unprecedented gesture of discussing the work of an African American writer at length, it also opened a rare platform for the discussion of race in the Chinese literary community. Not surprisingly, the question concerning Hughes's "color" immediately came up in the beginning of Fu's article. Lu Xun's absence from the meeting somehow gave Fu an opportunity to lambast what he assumed to be Lu Xun's color prejudice against black writers:¹

The African American writer, Langston Hughes, came to China through the Soviet Union in the beginning of July. His arrival simply could not compare to the visit of George Bernard Shaw: not only was Hughes not greeted by any gentlemen or ladies at the wharf, his name was nowhere to be found in the daily news. The reason for this is simple: Shaw is a celebrity and deserves a reception by our own celebrated figures. This rare occasion even brought together Mr. Lu Xun and Dr. Mei Lang-fan [an internationally renowned Chinese artist and opera singer] in the same hall. And what about Hughes? He was, of course, not our kind of celebrity in the eyes of our celebrated figures; what is more, there is a layer of skin-color prejudice! (254)

Soon after the event, Fu's words created a stir in the literary community and elicited an angry response from Lu Xun, who found Fu's statements not only unsubstantiated but also insulting and irresponsible. In a letter addressed to *Wenxue*, Lu Xun remarks, "Wu Shih [Fu Donghua] is a pen name[;] he must also be a celebrated figure, as no non-celebrated figures were likely to be admitted to receive Langston Hughes" (*Lu Xun Quanji* 420–21; vol. 4).²

Indeed, a proletariat writer himself who fought for the rights of the underprivileged throughout his writing career, Lu Xun would be the last person to hold prejudice toward people of color. A prominent figure of the May Fourth Movement (1919), Lu Xun certainly shared Hughes's anti-imperialist vision. On reading Lin Shu's translation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1904 while studying in Japan, Lu Xun exclaimed, "thinking about home and the long future ahead, I feel for the miseries of black slaves and I sigh for their prolonged suffering" (*Lu Xun Shuxinji* 3). In a passage little discussed by scholars in China, Lu Xun speaks up for Hughes and defends the international significance of Hughes's body of work. As Shao Xunmei examines the works of various American poets, including Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Carl Sandburg, Hart Crane, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and Gertrude Stein, he also comments on the nature of Hughes's work and jazz poetry: "I believe this kind of poetry will never get out of America, at least not the domain of the English language. They are small animals wriggling under the foot of cosmopolitanist poetry; just a kind of contrast, but they have their own lives" (qtd. in *Lu Xun Quanji* 316; vol. 5).³ In a telling response to Shao's shortsighted comment, Lu Xun remarks, "in praising the poetry of white writers, [Shao] has denigrated the black poet [Hughes]." Drawing on his status as a writer who has transcended the *domain* of Shao's community himself, Lu Xun writes: "[I]n reality, black poetry has already traveled beyond 'the domain of the English language,' and there is nothing that Shao or anyone could do about it" (*Lu Xun Quanji* 316; vol. 5).⁴ Although brief, Lu Xun's words underscore his keen awareness of the power of Hughes's poetry to connect world populations with a language that transcends linguistic and national borders.

Retrospectively, the rift between Lu Xun and Fu lends us important insights into the predominant perception of race in modern China, as reflected in the

racial undertones that Fu carries in his description of Hughes's appearance toward the end of his article:

[A]s what we could see from our meeting with Hughes, apart from having a slightly darker complexion, Hughes's jaws were not as distinct as one would imagine, his lips were not particularly thick or red, his mannerisms were not different than a white gentleman. He is certainly not as fierce looking as what we imagined a [black] revolutionary writer would be. (258)

Even though Fu was trying to present an African American figure who broke racial and biological stereotypes hitherto held by many in China, his remarks speak to the widely accepted notion of a racial binary of black barbarian and white gentleman.

As Tsu explains, the intellectual experience of modern China "has been burdened with an intense anxiety about its cultural destiny in the modern world" (32). The collapse of imperial China at the turn of the century, coupled with the threat of Western encroachment, prompted various leading Chinese intellectuals to reconsider questions of citizenship and nationhood by means of preserving racial and national purity "through a reinforcement of racial hierarchy" (46). Frank Dikötter points out that prominent writers and philosophers in the early decades of the Republic of China (1912–49) explicitly made clear the superiority of Chinese and Caucasians over other people of color. Kang Youwei, for instance, believed that the inferior races would have to be weeded out or mixed with the superior ones before a peaceable "One World" could be achieved (qtd. in Dikötter 89).⁵ Tang Caichang concurred: "Yellow and white are wise, red and black are stupid; yellow and white are rulers, red and black are slaves; yellow and white are united, red and black are scattered" (qtd. in Dikötter 81). On his trip to the United States and Hawai'i (then the Sandwich Islands), Liang Qichao expressed the urgency to reposition the Chinese among the superior races of the world, lest they eventually share the destiny of the "red" Indians, who "were not even aware of their extinction" (qtd. in Dikötter 75).

To Fu's credit, however racially charged his description of Hughes, he did challenge readers' racist potentialities at the beginning of the article: "If we do not hold the arrogant view that yellow is in fact superior to black, then it is worthwhile for us to know this warrior who has been fighting for a people of the lowest stratum" (254). To present a convincing argument, Fu first appeared to align with his readers only to refute their long-held assumption of Chinese superiority over blacks. Crucially, his remark opened a new platform for readers to engage the discussion of race and black intellectualism in ways that were largely unavailable prior to Hughes's visit. If indeed Stowe's portrayal of Uncle Tom was the most viable reference in the Chinese imaginary of African Americans, then Hughes's presence in China not only defied readers' racial assumptions but also problematized the existing Chinese racial discourse. After all, how could someone from

“the lowest stratum” possibly be comparable to a “white gentleman”? Against George Bernard Shaw, who visited China just a few months prior, Hughes’s image portrayed in the Shanghai literary magazine was not any less presentable than his fellow “white gentleman” writer, if also equally knowledgeable, well-traveled, and international in his vision—qualities, perhaps, that warrant a more likely scenario of Afro-Chinese collaboration in the literary community and beyond.

According to Fu, the Chinese writers asked Hughes five questions in the tea reception. Interestingly, three of them were related to the Soviet Union instead of the United States: how the second Five-Year Plan influenced the social, artistic, and cultural development in the Soviet Union; how realism and romanticism were used in the artistic and cultural scene to express the livelihood of the people there; and what was the general climate of the Soviet film industry. The rest of the session largely concerned the conditions of African American literature and American proletariat literature. Despite his brief responses, Hughes skillfully refracted his answer for the third question back to the lives of African Americans in the United States, lest his fellow writers become more preoccupied with Soviet communism than with the struggles and achievements of the black literary community (“Xiu” 254–58).

Thus, Hughes came across less as a black writer, or an American writer for that matter, than an international figure. Although his work primarily dealt with what George Hutchinson identifies as “black cultural expression in the context of ‘Americanism’” (4), Hughes offered a rare internationalist vision that contributed to a dynamic transnational circulation of cultures and ideas in and through Harlem. Contradicting the racial assumptions held by many in China, Hughes unknowingly assumed a cultural ambassadorial position when he was asked more questions about international affairs than issues related to America and the African American community. Amid the tumultuous political situation in China, Hughes’s visit played a crucial role in the transnational production of knowledge among leftist communities in the United States, the Soviet Union, Africa, China, and elsewhere. The travel circuit that he undertook brought together writers from around the world in the face of global white hegemony, driving home the notion that “race actually *transcends* the nation-state” (Edwards 116). If “the color line is global,” as Brent Hayes Edwards argues, then black US intellectuals such as Hughes can not only “lay claim to a discourse of universality” but also “the institutionalization of universality represented by international civil society” (116).

Importantly, Hughes’s internationalism in interwar China finds its most substantive and immediate expression in the subsequent Chinese translations of his poetry and prose, introducing to the Chinese literary scene for the very first time the work of an African American author. Hughes’s poem “Our Spring” (1933) was published in the second volume of *International Literature*, a left-wing publication also available in four languages: English, French, German, and Russian. In

“Hughes in China,” Fu translated Hughes’s short story “People without Shoes” (1931), which was inspired by Hughes’s visit to Haiti in 1931. Hughes’s novel *Not without Laughter* (1930) was translated three years later in 1936. The first book introducing African American literature, *Heiren Wenxue (Negro Literature)* (1933), was published shortly after Hughes left Shanghai. Translated by Yang Changxi, it examines the lives and religious (non)beliefs of black slaves and the works of early twentieth-century African American writers, including Hughes, Lewis Alexander, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Paul L. Dunbar, James B. Corrothers, James M. Bell, and Jean Toomer. Four years later in 1937, the first collection of black poetry, *Heiren Shixuan*, was published, featuring works by Hughes, Cullen, Toomer, Alexander, and Gwendolyn Bennett, among others. The birth of scholarly interest in translating African American literature in modern China indeed served more than just cultural-literary exchanges between the Chinese and the African American writers’ communities. As Chinese scholars began to recognize the fundamental place of African American literature in the US literary canon, they were also prompted to reexamine African American literature along with the proletariat work of Twain, London, and Upton Sinclair in ways that foster revolutionary spirit against racial capitalism in a global theater.

When Hughes’s account of the Shanghai trip appeared in *I Wonder as I Wander* in 1956, it had been twenty-three years since his visit and three years since he testified before Joseph McCarthy’s House Un-American Activities Committee. The McCarthy trial, as Rampersad maintains, “cast a long shadow over *I Wonder as I Wander*” (259). Hughes was eventually acquitted of being a communist, but while revising the manuscript for publication, the unpleasant encounters he recalled of the Japanese police trailing him in Japan and China and the Kuomintang oppression of leftist writers in China certainly struck haunting memories of his own experience with the FBI in the 1940s and the State Department up until the trial in 1953. *I Wonder as I Wander*, as Rampersad argues, “was the last significant statement he would ever make on radicalism and his own historic part in it” (60).

What, then, does all of this imply about Hughes’s internationalist vision? In the wake of the Bandung era, when other black intellectuals, such as the Du Boises, William Worthy, Robert F. Williams, and his wife, Mabel, made high-profile visits to Maoist China later in the decade and in the 1960s, what roles did Hughes have to play, to use Frazier’s words, in the “acts of global race making” (16)? To be sure, McCarthyism had a profound impact on how Hughes articulated his political thoughts thereafter, but it did little to stop him from using the powerful tool of internationalism as he continued to address the crises of racism and racial hegemony at home and abroad. In fact, the substantial changes that he made in the Shanghai chapters in the final manuscript of *I Wonder as I Wander* reflect his sustained effort in connecting the African American and African diaspora to China. Rather than indulging in more details of how Harold Isaacs’s office was destroyed

by the Kuomintang, which he had originally planned to do, Hughes selected material that underpins the complexities of black encounters in interwar Shanghai. Two scenes that he depicts, both involving rickshaws, serve retrospectively as precursors, and timely responses, to the rising call for Afro-Asian solidarity at the time.

Symbolically, the first rickshaw scene transpires almost immediately after Hughes opens the first of the four chapters on his Shanghai sojourn. Sitting in a rickshaw over seven thousand miles away from home, Hughes is thrilled to see a “Negro who looked exactly like a Harlemiter” riding in another rickshaw along the Bund. Hughes stands up in his rickshaw and yells, “Hey, man!” to which the man responds, “What ya sayin?” They pass each other by, “and I never saw him again” (245). Albeit terse, Hughes’s description of the brief encounter affords an absurd lost-in-translation moment in terms of skin color (an African American who looked exactly like a Harlemiter) and language (the non-reciprocity of Hughes’s yearning to communicate despite a shared language). The Harlemiter-looking man could be from any corner of the world but Harlem. Indeed, he could be from Liberia, where Hughes experienced his early identity crisis traveling along the African coast as a sea merchant. In 1923, as he recalls in *The Big Sea*, when he said to his fellow crew men on the ship, “Our problems in America are very much like yours . . . especially in the South. I am a Negro, too,” they laughed and shook their heads and said, “You, white man! You, white man!” (102–03).

The very moment of dislocatedness with which Hughes was confronted, and the realization that people of color were not recognized as Americans or, ironically, *white* until they stepped outside of their national boundaries, would continue to haunt Hughes’s consciousness. A decade after this incident, Hughes’s encounter with the black man on the rickshaw in Shanghai should have been less shocking, given his previous engagement with people of various racial backgrounds from Europe, Haiti, Cuba, Mexico, the Soviet Union, and Soviet Central Asia. Nevertheless, in *I Wonder as I Wander*, he deliberately highlights this moment of *déjà vu* that speaks of the vanity and invalidity of defining one’s cultural identity purely by the marker of one’s color. The constant contestation of racial identity that Hughes articulates at different points of his life is well exemplified by his projection of the rickshaw scene from 1933 Shanghai to the global context of 1956. The beginning of the mid-1950s, as Daniel Won-gu Kim tells us, was a time when the worldwide call for decolonization had “a transformative impact on Hughes,” inspiring a renewed urgency that he felt for facilitating pan-African dialogues. The moment of disconnect that Hughes had with the black man in the rickshaw then metaphorically prompted him to redraw links with black communities abroad during his global travels. What marks Hughes’s “African (re)turn” in the 1950s, to borrow Kim’s characterization of Hughes’s newfound pursuit, was

a much richer layering of internationalism of which his Shanghai sojourn was an important part (419).

To be sure, Hughes was never at the radical front line of the Afro-Asian movement at a time when China became increasingly involved in decolonization in Asia and Africa, but one would be remiss to relegate his role as largely irrelevant to the conversation. Through careful arrangement of material in the final manuscript, Hughes connects black and Chinese suffering in ways that give Afro-Asian solidarity new meanings by tapping into what he witnessed in the Chinese Republican era. What speaks to Hughes's experience as an African American abroad in China was crucially the concurrent Chinese disenfranchisement vis-à-vis white imperialism. Blackness alone, he realized, did not necessarily bring more togetherness than the transracial understanding of human suffering based on institutionalized racism and class oppression. In a second account involving a rickshaw, Hughes delineates the kind of racism faced by the local Chinese in Shanghai that he found disturbingly familiar to what he experienced at home. He remarks:

The rickshaw boys ran faster in Shanghai than they did anywhere else in the Orient. If they didn't run fast, a Chinese war lord or banker might kick them soundly on dismounting from a rickshaw, and then not pay the fare. The Germans or English or the French did not usually kick coolies, but were known to slap them at will. . . . [F]ew residents of the city seemed disturbed by brutality or death. (*I* 248)

The picture that Hughes portrays stresses an embarrassing chapter of American slavery and Jim Crow. Recalling his attempt to rent a room in the Chinese YMCA on Szechuen Road, Hughes expresses feelings of disturbance in finding that "only white Americans or Europeans could secure accommodations." No leading hotels in the International Settlement, he observes, "accepted Asiatic or Negro guests" (248). Given the worldwide practice of colonialism, the migration of Euro-American racism elsewhere ought not to be surprising, yet Hughes purposely challenges that which had otherwise been made natural and acceptable. "I was constantly amazed in Shanghai," Hughes remarks scathingly, "at the impudence of white foreigners in drawing a color line against the Chinese in China itself" (249).

To conclude the Shanghai section of the autobiography, in the final manuscript, Hughes added "Bon Voyage Chicken" to its previous chapter, "Jazz in China," to highlight the vibrant jazz scene that he frequented throughout his stay. The "jazz mecca" of Asia attracted such black musicians as Teddy Weatherford, Nora Holt, Valaida Snow, Bob Hill, Jack Carter, and Buck Clayton, who brought much thrill and fervor to the soundscape of the International Settlement and beyond.⁶ Weatherford's band, in particular, "had become a sort of permanent institution in the Orient" by making international tours around "Calcutta and Bombay through the Malay States to Manila, Hong

Kong and Port Arthur” (251). As Hughes includes traveling black musicians in his narrative, he highlights the fact that they, too, have left footprints on the transnational pathway of black internationalism in and through the heart and history of interwar Shanghai.⁷

Hughes’s sojourn might have been brief, but China would continue to be an important site of reference as he communicated to his fellow citizens the danger of American racism and its problematic relationship to the global color line. At the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Hughes responded to the historic event with the following words in the *Chicago Defender*:

What is happening in China is important to Negroes, in fact, to people of color all round the world. . . . Under the Nationalist government in China with its white Western backers, there was a great deal of Jim Crow. I saw it with my own eyes in Shanghai and Nanking when I was there before the war. Being colored, I felt it, too. I do not like Jim Crow in either Chicago or China. The majority of Chinese people did not like Jim Crow either. But the Chinese Uncle Tom liked Jim Crow because they grew rich from it. Chiang Kai-Shek was a Chinese Uncle Tom. (*Langston* 60)

Rather than reporting on the regime change in Communist China in ways that could easily be unrelatable for his readers at home, Hughes skillfully links Nationalist China to Jim Crow for them to understand why and how global affairs matter to their existence. Playfully, he spins around the formula of color politics by stripping the racial and cultural context of Uncle Tom, applying it to the international politics in China. In doing so, he de-equates Blackness and inferiority and reconstructs the notion of Uncle Tom around the fundamentals of morality in all humanity—if anyone was to be shamed, it would be those who believed in Jim Crow.

At the apex of the Civil Rights Movement—two days before Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” speech in the March on Washington and barely one day before W. E. B. Du Bois’s passing—on 26 August 1963, Hughes wrote a poem titled “China” while he was in Paris. The six-line poem, currently housed in the Langston Hughes Papers in Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (see [fig. 1](#)), has never been published nor has its existence been known previously:

and so the old lion
Lifts it [sic] mighty head
and roars within the cage
In which it is confined
and looks out on a narrow world—
But is not blind.

Judging from the obvious grammatical mistake in the second line, the handwritten poem appears to be a first draft not intended for publication. That the poem

china
and so the old lion
lifts its mighty head
and roars within the
cage
in which it is confined
and looks out on
a narrow world.
But is not blind.
Paris
8/26/63

Fig. 1. "China." Langston Hughes Papers, James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, JWJ MSS 26, box 224, folder 3711. Permission granted by Harold Ober Associates Incorporated.

seems to start *in media res* suggests the possibility of Hughes imagining it as a sequel, or a continuation of his thought stream, to an earlier poem that he wrote, "Roar, China!" (1937), at the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. Different from the China that "snort[s] fire" as a "yellow dragon of the Orient" (3) in "Roar, China!" Maoist China in this poem is confined in a cage, reflecting perhaps its isolation from the world as a result of the Sino-Soviet split and heightened Sino-US tension over the war in Vietnam. Given Hughes's reluctance to give any political statements about China and Chinese politics in the post-McCarthy era, it is hard to determine what prompted him to write this poem in the middle of his "Grand Tour" around Europe (Rampersad 365). It could be a response to Mao's "Statement Supporting the American Negroes in Their Just Struggle Against Racial Discrimination by U.S. Imperialism" issued earlier in the month

on 8 August. It could also simply be Hughes's continued support for China's active involvement in global decolonization, despite its political isolation from the West. Regardless, China never left Hughes's consciousness as the sixty-one-year-old poet continued to foster internationalist dialogue, both public and private, during his global travels and in his still prolific writing career.

As the first African American intellectual to set foot on Chinese soil, Hughes pioneers what none of his contemporaries or predecessors had been able to achieve—he rewrites the public image of African Americans in the Chinese cultural and intellectual imagination. Crucially, his sojourn pushes beyond the limits of black internationalism as he responds to American and European global hegemony by using China as an experimental ground. At a time when the Soviet Union held center stage in communist revolutionary thought, Hughes's Chinese encounters challenged the assumption in American and African American communities that China is largely irrelevant in the discourse of proletarianism. Hughes's visit, despite its brevity, left a powerful imprint on his consciousness, as he repeatedly included China in the complex web of global liberation in his writing. Linking local-regional to outer-national sites across the United States, Africa, China, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere, Hughes's work conveys a kind of universalism that transcends racial, national, and sociopolitical boundaries of the American color line. In negotiating a host of cultural, linguistic, and sociohistorical differences that nonetheless unify his body of work, Hughes discovers for himself and his people alternative democratic spaces that allow for mobility and continuity in how African Americans define their positions in the world.

Notes

1. The year Hughes visited, Lu Xun established the China League for Civil Rights (in which Harold Isaacs and Agnes Smedley were active members) with Madame Sun Yat-sen and other activists. The League was under strict surveillance by Chiang Kai-shek, whose agents assassinated its general secretary, Yang Xingfo (also former secretary to Sun Yat-sen) in June 1933. Lu Xun's leftist stance and close associations with Yang and Madame Sun, Chiang's sister-in-law with sharp political differences, had led him to be a constant target of the Nationalist Party.
2. Lu Xun had already met Hughes eight days prior to the tea reception at a private dinner hosted by Madame Sun Yat-sen at Isaacs's residence. The dinner remained under-explored until 2005, when Shen Pengnian gathered various first-hand sources, including a personal interview with Madame Sun's secretary, Liao Mengxing, that mentioned this meeting in issue 27 of *Shaoxing Lu Xun Studies*.
3. Special thanks to Katherine Yao Lan for her assistance on the project and for translating the quotation from Shao Xunmei. All other translations are mine.

4. The passage reveals the rivalry between Lu Xun and Shao Xunmei as a result of their different financial backgrounds and political stances. Pointing to Shao's social status and wealthy family connection, Lu Xun compared his own status to black slaves ("in the eyes of Shao") by referencing the marginal place of Hughes's work in the American literary canon (*Lu Xun Quanji* 316; vol. 5).
5. See also Shu-mei Shih for discussion of the racial politics with which Chinese intellectuals and politicians were engaged in early twentieth-century China.
6. For details about what Claude Lapham wrote about the music scene in Shanghai for the jazz magazine, *Metronome*, see Andrew F. Jones.
7. See Jones and Andrew Field for detailed discussions of the jazz scene in modern China.

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