

China-Africa Relations, Political Conditions, and Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o’s *Wizard of the Crow*

Peter Leman

Abstract: Standing on the cusp of a global transition from a Western-dominated world to one experiencing the effects of the “economic renaissance of East Asia,” as Giovanni Arrighi calls it, Ngūgĩ’s wa Thiong’o’s 2006 novel *Wizard of the Crow* reiterates the author’s well-known critique of neocolonialism but also, perhaps more importantly, registers the growing presence of Asia in Africa and offers a thought-provoking consideration of the meaning of that presence in an era of global capital. Though commonly identified as a “dictator novel,” *Wizard* is only partly about “The Ruler” of the fictional African nation of Aburiria. Through the titular character, Ngūgĩ develops a narrative that explores the opportunities and dangers of embracing the paths of modernization marked out by the advancing economic powers of East Asia. This paper analyzes that narrative, focusing in particular on the thematic and formal elements that reflect and are relevant to China’s all-important ambitions in Africa and its core policy of offering aid “without political conditions.” These issues ultimately involve the novel in contemporary debates specific to the China-in-Africa phenomenon.

Keywords: China-Africa relations, *Wizard of the Crow*, Ngūgĩ wa Thiong’o, modernization, globalization

The revolt against the West created the political conditions for the social and economic empowerment of the peoples of the non-Western world. The economic renaissance of East Asia

is the first and clearest sign that such an empowerment has begun.

Giovanni Arrighi, *Adam Smith in Beijing* (2007)

We . . . offer our assistance [to Africa] with the deepest sincerity and without any political conditions.

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao (2003)

We have turned east, where the sun rises, and given our back to the west, where the sun sets.

Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe (2005)

Introduction

In an early chapter of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s novel *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), the central antagonist—the “Ruler” of the Free Republic of Aburiria, the fictionalized Kenya where the novel is set—speaks to a group of Aburirian citizens during a public ceremony at which his sycophantic ministers have presented him with a gift. As a show of thanks, the Ruler announces that he has freed hundreds of political prisoners, many of whom were imprisoned precisely so they could be released to demonstrate the Ruler’s magnanimous and forgiving nature. To further prove his capacity to pardon, the Ruler invites Dr. Yunice Immaculate Mgenzi to join him on the stage. Yunice, the Ruler explains, was a revolutionary during the Cold War. She was a “Maoist. *Alikuwa mtu ya Beijing*”—a person of Beijing, or one of Beijing’s people (21). The Ruler, in contrast, despite his characteristic megalomania and self-aggrandizing identification with/as the nation, is *mtu ya West*. The Ruler rose to power through an early “alliance with the colonial state and the white forces behind it” (233) and, as the anonymous narrator of *Wizard* observes, “the armed forces and the West” are the “two main pillars” upon which his rule is built (645). The Ruler is able to forgive Yunice because she has not only overcome her Maoism but has also become one of the Ruler’s devotees and, therefore, one of the West’s. Having turned from East to West, Yunice is appointed Aburiria’s first female Deputy Ambassador to the United States, and later becomes the Ambassador. This kind of dependency upon and obsession with the West is one of the

central critiques that Ngũgĩ's satirical novel levels at African dictators. Indeed, as Jeff Turrentine writes in his 2006 *New York Times* review, the novel parodies and denounces the "neocolonial system in which today's lending banks and multinationals have supplanted yesterday's European overlords" throughout Africa. In the novel, Ngũgĩ cleverly coins the term "corporonialism" (corporate-colonialism) to describe and parody contemporary forms of colonial control that function through hegemonic networks of global capitalism, which he sees as primarily originating in and functioning from the West.

In all of his exaggerated egotism, the Ruler is a patchwork of several post-independence African dictators: Idi Amin, Sani Abacha, Daniel Arap Moi, Omar al-Bashir, and Robert Mugabe. However, the Ruler is out of synch with at least one of these dictators in a key respect. While the Ruler turns West, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of Zimbabwe's independence in 2005, Mugabe, perhaps the most infamous African dictator living today, asserted, "We have turned east, where the sun rises, and given our back to the west, where the sun sets" (qtd. in Meldrum). Mugabe was speaking of Zimbabwe's emerging relationship with China after Western powers had, from his perspective, mistreated and abandoned Zimbabwe in a time of great economic need. The US and other Western entities are known for offering aid and investments only on certain conditions—namely, that African leaders respect human rights, end corruption, and promote democracy and free trade. These are ostensibly positive aims, of course, but for many in Africa such conditions are evidence of the power-mongering tendencies of the West. In contrast, China's business in Africa claims to be purely business. As Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao declared, "We . . . offer our assistance [to Africa] with the deepest sincerity and without any political conditions" (qtd. in Alden 15). Whereas Ngũgĩ's novel places the Ruler's neocolonial adoration of the West in opposition to a Maoist ideology of the revolutionary past, in reality not only Mugabe but many African dictators and political leaders have eagerly and wholeheartedly become *watu wa* Beijing. In fact, two months after Turrentine's review of Ngũgĩ's novel, the *New York Times* ran an article about another seminal event in contemporary African affairs, although this one was in progress and took place farther

east: the Beijing Summit of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), during which the Chinese government welcomed political leaders, including forty heads of state, from forty-eight of the then fifty-three African states, for the official purposes of expanding trade, securing energy resources (particularly oil), and offering aid to Africa's struggling economies. "The unofficial purpose," writes reporter Joseph Kahn, was "to redraw the world's strategic map, forming tighter political ties between China, now the fastest-growing major economy, and a continent whose leaders often complain of being neglected by the United States and Europe."

If the world's strategic map was indeed redrawn not simply by the 2006 Forum but by China's unprecedented advances into Africa leading up to the Forum,¹ and if African leaders have increasingly turned East and embraced Chinese aid, investments, and multinational corporations (MNCs), why does Ngũgĩ's dictator reject Beijing and continue to court the West? One answer is that critical perspectives on the West and neo-colonialism are still necessary and relevant because the West has hardly ceased to be a dominant player in African political and economic affairs. However, this is not a particularly original argument. Indeed, Ngũgĩ's imaginative critique of Africa's West-leaning neocolonial "bourgeoisie" marks *Wizard* as the most recent variation on a Fanonian theme that he has addressed repeatedly in his work at least since the groundbreaking *Devil on the Cross* (1980), his first novel in Gĩkũyũ. Interpretations of *Wizard* have recognized its significant formal innovations—for example, in combining various techniques of African orature with the novel form—and their relationship to a range of neocolonial themes, but such analyses take for granted the timeliness of those themes, when in reality African nations are experiencing a new and arguably very different set of risks and opportunities in the era of globalization.² Literary critics such as Joseph McLaren discuss the novel's shift toward questions of globalization, but in such readings the phenomenon continues to have a Western character. "Ngũgĩ shows," writes McLaren, "that the West and global capital are implicated in the dilemmas of African leadership" (152). Increasingly, however, it is not the West's as much as the East's global capital that is implicated in the dilemmas and dreams of African leaders.³

A second and more intriguing answer to the question of the Ruler's reason for rejecting Beijing can therefore be found in the remainder of *Wizard's* sweeping narrative. The Ruler's reference to the East, in other words, is the first but not the last.⁴ Following the Ruler's speech, a remarkably prescient thematic and formal thread emerges that is borne out through a series of intertexts, allusions, and characters that reference India, China, Buddhism, Taoism, Asian mysticism, and other Eastern political, philosophical, and religious ideas. Ngūgĩ published his novel at the putative beginning of China's aggressive foray into Africa, but he wrote the text over the previous decade during the key years leading up to the FOCAC Summit. As such, the novel appears to register the growing influence of the East in Africa in the early twenty-first century. From one perspective, China (more on India below), with its single-minded interest in African natural resources and willingness to skirt international laws to obtain them, seems poised to repeat the colonial pattern of economic exploitation (although claims to this effect in Western media can also be read as evidence of the West's anxieties about its own declining global influence).⁵ From another perspective, however, China's investments and apparent political neutrality have the potential to boost African economies significantly.⁶ Although I tend toward the former assessment, it is necessary at least to recognize arguments on all sides of the issue and consider the possibility that China may have something positive to offer Africa. This, I argue, is the real reason Ngūgĩ's dictator rejects Beijing. The Ruler's disdainful reference to Mao reflects his continued alliance with the West, yet the novel as a whole explores but does not commit to a very different view of what the East has to offer. Standing, in effect, on the cusp of a global transition from a world dominated by the West to one experiencing the effects of the "economic renaissance of East Asia," as Giovanni Arrighi terms it (1), Ngūgĩ's novel reiterates his critique of neocolonialism and, perhaps more importantly, marks the growing presence of the East in Africa and offers ways of understanding the meaning of that presence in an era of global capital.⁷

It is important to acknowledge, of course, that Ngūgĩ is interested in more than China. In a 2004 interview, for example, he explained that

he hoped the novel would demonstrate that “an African language can talk about anything in the world. It can talk about Brazil, India, Asia, China, astronomy, philosophy, and so on” (Rodrigues 167). However, although many of the novel’s references to Asia apply specifically to India, my focus is China. Not only does the text contain as many if not more references to China, the issues and themes that emerge from the novel’s attention to Asia’s looming presence in Africa resonate in intriguing ways with issues particular to the unique character of China’s policies and modes of economic and diplomatic engagement. India, of course, also has significant economic interests there, but its presence has been, to date, somewhat less aggressive and far less ubiquitous.⁸ Furthermore, India has a history with Africa that is very different from China’s. Indeed, economist Azar Jammine argues that the fact that Indians have had a considerable presence on the continent for decades and share the English language with many Africans makes India a “more natural trade partner” than China (qtd. in Baldauf). These issues are worth exploring in relationship to Ngūgĩ’s novel and, in fact, the topic of India in Africa is currently quite popular in literary studies: a 2011 special issue of *Research in African Literatures*, for example, was devoted to the topic of “Asian African Literatures,” with a focus on South Asian writers and cultures in Africa. Additionally, scholars such as Guarav Desai, Stephanie Jones, and Isabel Hofmeyr have contributed significantly to our understanding of “Indian Ocean Literatures,” or those narratives that “call attention to the multiple legacies, histories, and identities that have long circulated in the world of the Indian Ocean,” including those circulating between India and Africa (Desai 718).⁹ As important as these perspectives are and as fruitful as it would be to apply them to *Wizard*, my purpose in this paper is somewhat different. I am less interested in how the novel calls attention to the histories of East Africa’s relationship to India than I am in how the novel can be brought into conversation with the more recent history of China’s presence in Africa, a topic that has been largely neglected in scholarship of African literature. Key themes emerge in *Wizard* around the broad topic of Asia in Africa that reflect and relate to China’s core policy of offering aid “without political conditions.” These themes ultimately

offer a distinctive way of bringing the novel to bear upon contemporary debates specific to China in Africa.

In fact, because it appeared in 2006, *Wizard* actually anticipates the bulk of commentaries in the social sciences and news media and offers an equally sophisticated perspective on the possibilities and dangers of African relationships with the East.¹⁰ In particular, the novel's interventionary masterstroke is its indirect and ambiguous representations of the East as offering or modeling, from its stance of political neutrality, a more "therapeutic" relationship with modernity, technology, and development than the West (Williams 393).¹¹ Ngũgĩ's novel tests and explores the limits of these ideas but, despite their promise, ultimately rejects them and reaffirms the immediate necessity of political engagement as well as the power and efficacy of indigenous African forms of art, philosophy, and ingenuity for defining modernity and achieving the aims of political action. In what follows, I focus on several stages of discursive exploration in the novel as the narrative moves from nostalgia for China's revolutionary past and recognition of the damaging effects of Western hegemony to a tentative experiment with the spiritual and (purportedly) politically-neutral qualities of Eastern philosophy to, finally, an awareness that any philosophy which refuses political engagement, or refuses to recognize that everything is political, will not, or should not, thrive in Africa. Hence, although the novel facilitates a perspective initially open to what China has to offer, it ultimately suggests that China's claim to be free of "political conditions" is deeply flawed. In effect, the novel asserts its own conditions for political cooperation in the age of globalization: Africa can work with and learn from China, India, and other international partners, but such work and cooperation must be on equal terms.

Conditional Effects: Prestige Projects and Political Humiliation in Africa

By beginning *Wizard* with, among other things, an image of a former Maoist whom the Ruler reformed, Ngũgĩ demonstrates how far the post-independence African state has strayed from its revolutionary history and the principles exemplified by others who share that history.¹²

The significance of the novel's reference to Mao, however, and of its subsequent discourse about Asia, can be best understood if we begin by looking to the larger context in which the Ruler voices his opposition to Mao. As noted, the Ruler's statement comes during a public ceremony at which his sycophantic ministers have presented him with a gift. A central component of the novel's parodic critique has to do with the gift, which is a proposal for a literally-over-the-top building project called "Marching to Heaven." In an effort to lift the Ruler to a physical height that reflects his (imagined) global preeminence, the Foreign Minister, Machokali, proposes to "raise a building to the very gates of Heaven so that the Ruler could call on God daily. . . . The Ruler would be the daily recipient of God's advice, resulting in a rapid growth of Aburiria to heights never before dreamt by humans" (Ngũgĩ 16). The Ruler is exceptionally pleased with this proposal and gives his blessing, authorizing Machokali to begin courting the New York-based Global Bank for construction loans. Compare this fictional project to some of the major building projects that have taken place in Africa in recent years: new foreign affairs ministry offices in Angola and Mozambique, sports stadiums in Sierra Leone and the Central African Republic, a new African Union building in Ethiopia, and presidential palaces in DR Congo and Zimbabwe (Alden 23). All of these and more have been funded or directly built by the Chinese government and are examples of what Chris Alden calls "symbolic diplomacy" and "prestige projects": gifts to African rulers as a sign of good faith and a means of initiating or guaranteeing commitment to bilateral diplomatic and economic ventures.¹³ Shortly after the 2006 FOCAC summit, the head of China's Export Import Bank predicted that over the next three years, more than \$20 billion would be provided to finance Chinese exports and business in Africa, compared to the \$17 billion in loan commitments to Africa from the World Bank (the model for Ngũgĩ's "Global Bank") over the same period (Brautigam 2). Furthermore, in 2009, China surpassed the US as Africa's largest trading partner, with a trade balance of \$79.8 billion compared to the US' \$78.9 billion (Wonacott). Estimates of subsequent years have placed China's trade balance with Africa at over \$100 billion.¹⁴ Do these projects and num-

bers suggest that China is the real source of funding for developments in the vein of Marching to Heaven?

Despite the similarities, there is a major difference between Marching to Heaven and China's prestige projects: beyond the proposal, Marching to Heaven is never begun, much less completed. In response to the pointless and economically disastrous project, an activist movement—the Movement for the Voice of the People—begins a campaign of resistance and agitation. The bulk of the novel follows the intersecting plots as the government devises increasingly desperate means of begging for Western money and the Movement finds increasingly creative ways of disrupting the Ruler's self-aggrandizing activities. Indeed, the Movement's ability to undermine the Ruler's authority and create political unrest prevents him from obtaining loans from the "missionaries" of the Global Bank. When he fails to court representatives from the Bank during their visit to Aburiria, the Ruler, Machokali, and others travel to New York City, where the Ruler hopes to address the United Nations and finally secure the loans from the Bank. Despite his best efforts, however, the Ruler is continually rebuffed, ignored, and humiliated by the US government and the Global Bank. Just when the Ruler believes the loans will be approved, the Bank sends a letter stating that there are no clear "economic benefits to Marching to Heaven," and the funds cannot be released without a stronger justification for the project (Ngũgĩ 485). Later, after the Ruler has begun to suffer the effects of a mysterious illness brought on by the Bank's refusal, a group of "Bank diplomats" humiliate him further by chastising him for allowing political unrest in Aburiria, caused in part by the Movement for the Voice of the People (497). "Put your house in order," they command. "Then send us a memorandum addressing anything new you wish us to consider. The Bank will review it thoroughly" (500). This is the first of several instances in which the Global Bank and representatives of the US and other Western governments impose conditions on funds. The fictional US Ambassador, Gabriel Gemstone, tells the Ruler that Washington and "the capitals of the leading industrial democracies" are "concern[ed] about what [is] happening in the State of Aburiria" (578). At one point late in the novel, the funds from the Bank are still

available, but first “[t]he Ruler had to come up with peaceful measures to end the unrest in the country” (640). When the unrest does not end, the Bank not only decides definitively against loans for Marching to Heaven, but they “put on hold even those funds previously agreed upon. Worse still, the funds would remain frozen until the Aburīrian government had instituted economic and political reforms and took concrete steps to end inflation and corruption” (649). The Ruler is utterly humiliated—the narrator describes his “injured dignity” (581)—by the constant “warnings, threats, and wishes,” or political conditions, the West insists upon (583).

As noted above, the hallmark principle of China’s foreign policy in Africa has been the absence of “political conditions.” In contrast, Alden describes the “unadulterated use of conditionalities by Western donors” (16) and states that the “West’s employment of conditionalities” is “merely the latest in decades of humiliating experiences at the hands of former colonial powers and the United States” (20). The Ruler’s experiences with the Global Bank and US diplomats reflect these humiliating practices and provide commentary on this uneven political dynamic. On the one hand, we of course do not want the Ruler to obtain the money for Marching to Heaven and thereby drive his country into irrecoverable debt. The Global Bank and Gemstone are justified in their hesitance, and ultimate refusal, to fund the project and have valid points in insisting that the Ruler end corruption, inflation, and unrest; these are desirable goals. On the other hand, the satirical nature of Ngūgī’s representation of the diplomats and the fact that they attribute the Ruler’s problems in part to the Movement for the Voice of the People suggest that they do not have Aburīria’s best interests at heart and are more concerned with controlling the Ruler and his nation than helping the Aburīrian people. Consequently, although the Ruler is the object of satire and ridicule throughout the novel, we cannot help but feel some sympathy for him when he is ignored, mistreated, and infantilized by the West simply because he is a black African. The East does not save him from this humiliation directly and we can only speculate on whether or not the Chinese government would have funded Marching to Heaven had the Ruler approached them rather than the

Global Bank. It seems likely were they to see it as a prestige project but unlikely were they interested in any kind of direct benefit to themselves. The point, of course, is to note the contrast between the West's use of conditionalities (in the novel and the real world) and China's historical willingness to build and invest in Africa without political conditions. The fictional counterpart of this phenomenon is found in the titular "Wizard of the Crow," to whom the Ruler's ministers turn for help in healing his disease.

When the doctors and scientists in New York fail to understand the nature and origins of the Ruler's illness, the symptoms of which include balloonish corporeal swelling, dubbed "Self-Induced Expansion" or SIE, and speech that is stuck on the word "if,"¹⁵ the Wizard is flown out from Aburiria to see if his renowned powers of sorcery can relieve the Ruler's ailments. Using a simple divining technique, the Wizard succeeds in releasing the Ruler's tongue, and when the Ruler speaks, the depth of his humiliation and of the pathology resulting from the racialized basis of that humiliation becomes clear. The Wizard states what he takes to be the questions stuck in the Ruler's throat, expressed, significantly, in conditional terms: "*IF I had been white, would they [the Global Bank] have done what they did to me? Or, IF I had been white would they have treated me the way they just did in the presence of my ministers?*" (491; emphasis in original). The Ruler speaks at last and confirms the diagnosis: "That's right. . . . That's what I was trying to tell them" (491). The Ruler is paralyzed by the humiliation he suffers at the hands of the West and is freed by the healing powers of the Wizard, the figure through whom discourse about Asia most clearly emerges in the novel, particularly on the important question of whether or not one can, or should, maintain a stance of political neutrality as China claims to do in its relations with Africa. To fully understand the significance of what the Wizard achieves in healing the Ruler of his "malady of words" (349)—which he does without political conditions—and the significance of the Wizard as a personified litmus test for modes of understanding China-Africa relationships, we must turn to earlier sections of the novel and trace the role of the East in shaping the Wizard as a master of "modern" sorcery (405).

Life Apart from Politics: Testing the Promise of Buddhism and Asia-as-Technê

Discussions of the novel have yet to account fully for the fact that the novel is titled *Wizard of the Crow*: the Wizard is an important character, no doubt, but he is a reluctant participant in political action, and other characters are just as central and much more politically involved (on both sides) than he. Why, then, does the novel carry his name, or title, instead of the Ruler's?¹⁶ My response is that Ngũgĩ wants us to resist giving the Ruler too much attention and instead consider more deeply the significance of the Wizard, not simply as someone who progresses from political detachment to political activism, as I will show, but someone who represents possible modes of structuring present and future relationships with the East, an immediate and forward-looking concern. The correspondence between the Wizard's willingness to help the ruthless dictator of Aburiria and China's policy of offering aid and assistance in the same politically-neutral mode is reinforced by the Wizard's general philosophy of political detachment which defines his relationships and actions up to the moment when he heals the Ruler.

When we first meet the Wizard, a few chapters after the Marching to Heaven ceremony, he is known simply as Kamītī: he has not yet become the Wizard and appears to be little more than another beggar on the streets of Aburiria. In reality, despite his thread-bare and care-worn appearance after months of failing to find work, Kamītī is highly educated and holds degrees in economics and business administration from India, where he also studied herbology and all varieties of Eastern religion, history, and philosophy. However, others in the novel see this education as less prestigious than what one could receive in the West. In particular, Titus Tajirika, the Chairman of Marching to Heaven and owner of a major real estate company to whom Kamītī confidently appeals for a job, scoffs at Kamītī's education and invokes stereotypes of Indians being unfair and intrusive businesspeople in Africa. Kamītī responds: "My opinion is that there are many things we could learn from India and other Asian countries, just as they have much to learn from us" (55). Titus eventually tires of listening to Kamītī and turns him away. Although the Chairman rejects his enthusiastic display of his

Eastern education (just as the Ruler rejects, or at least reforms, Maoists), Kamĩtĩ's exchange with Titus provides a clear view of his optimistic attitude toward Asia and the promise of cooperation and mutual benefit. Because this optimism changes significantly by the end of the novel, Ngũgĩ does not necessarily endorse Kamĩtĩ's position. But given the newness of contemporary Chinese and African relationships, it is possible to read Kamĩtĩ's position as one way of constructing or defining Africa's connection to the East. Scholars, politicians, and others have debated whether China is to be seen as a partner, competitor, or colonizer (Alden 6).¹⁷ At this early stage in the novel, there is hope that Africa may be able to learn from Asian countries and vice versa.

In subsequent chapters, Kamĩtĩ articulates some of Asia's lessons for Africa; most concern developing a more heightened spiritual awareness and a deeper connection to nature, both of which also entail political neutrality. For example, after being rejected by Titus, Kamĩtĩ begins a relationship with the Chairman's secretary, Nyawĩra, who secretly leads the Movement for the Voice of the People. She conceals this from Kamĩtĩ for much of the novel, although she makes her opposition to the Ruler clear and declares her belief in the necessity of political engagement. "The water I drink, the food I eat, the clothes I wear, the bed I sleep on," she states, "are all determined by politics, good or bad. Politics is about power and how it is used. Politics involves choosing sides in the struggle for power" (Ngũgĩ 86–87). She then asks Kamĩtĩ, "So on which side are you?" (87). He responds by asserting his belief in "humanity, divine, indivisible" (87), rather than in a particular political position. "Kamĩtĩ," the narrator tells us, "wanted to lead a decent life apart from politics," and after witnessing some of the political realities of Aburĩria, he decides to leave that indecent life behind and become a monk-like ascetic in the forest (129). When Nyawĩra tracks him down and resumes their discussion about politics, Kamĩtĩ offers an impassioned speech on Eastern thought, which appears to justify his retreat from modern life. "I was drawn to the religions of the East," he begins, speaking of his time in India. "I wanted to learn more about the prophets and teachers from the East like Buddha, Jain's Mahavira, Guru Nanak of the Sikhs, and even Confucius of China" (210). He describes his fascination with

the concepts of “karma” and “nirvana” and implies a parallel between his sylvan retreat and that of the Buddha, who reached enlightenment “lying between two large trees in a forest” (211). Kamītī concludes his speech by begging Nyawīra, who wants to return to fight the Ruler, to stay with him: “Let’s build a shelter here; listen to what the trees and the animals have to tell us” (211). In other words, the narrator explains, he asks her to turn her back on Aburīria “so as to become a hermit, one of the children of the new-millennium Buddha . . . searching for the meaning of life” (211–12). Kamītī believes that one of the lessons to be learned from Eastern thought is that there is a higher, more enlightened mode of existence that allows one to stand above and beyond the political conditions of modern life.

This romanticized image of the East and the type of life outside politics that Kamītī believes Eastern thought makes possible seems to repeat conventional Orientalist characterizations of Asia as more deeply spiritual than other parts of the world and more exemplary in its concern for nature and enlightenment. Such characterizations envision Eastern spirituality as a contrast to the West’s superior, but spiritually empty, achievements in technology and even, at times, as a remedy for the harmful effects of Western industrialization and over-technologization. Indeed, in *Wizard* the West is a place where technology and industrial excess undermine spirituality (e.g., in the belief that Marching to Heaven, funded by the West, will make the Ruler equal to God) and where technology is used in ways contrary to nature. Three of the Ruler’s ministers, for example, travel to different Western countries where they have body parts unnaturally altered in order to gain favor with the Ruler. Machokali has his eyes enlarged to the size of light bulbs to enable him “to spot the Ruler’s enemies” (13–14). Titus Tajirika, believing he will never reach his true economic potential until he becomes a white American, finds a clinic in New York City that specializes in “genetic engineering, cloning, transplants, and plastic surgery” (741). Titus manages to have an arm and a leg transplant to replace his own with white limbs, as if to say, perhaps, that Titus “would give an arm and a leg” to be white (742).¹⁸ Such examples, satirical as they are, suggest that the West’s supposedly superior achievements in technology are actually

deeply harmful to the mind and spirit and that the East offers a model of spirituality that leads to more enlightened modes of being, including a deeper appreciation for indigenous African ideas, beliefs, and customs. In fact, Kamītī relates the Eastern concept of karma to that of “the chi among the Ibo” (210), suggesting that the spiritual sensitivity he has learned through Eastern thought has actually helped him rediscover indigenous African ideas and beliefs.¹⁹ Despite the hint of an Orientalist ring to the novel’s contrast between Western technology and Eastern spirituality, however, there is a much more productive and nuanced way to read Kamītī’s, and the novel’s, discourse about the East that reveals a complex perspective on how Africa can make sense of its relationships with Asia. In particular, I argue that Ngūgī is testing the possibilities of a discourse comparable to what R. John Williams identifies as “Asia-as-technê” (392).

Williams defines and analyzes the discourse of “Asia-as-technê” as it appeared in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American literature and culture when fears about the negative effects of technological development and industrialization corresponded to an emerging belief that “therapeutic alternatives to the overtechnologization . . . of Western modernity” could be found in the East (392–93). Williams borrows the term “technê” from Heidegger and explains that, more than “simply a return to ‘nature,’ the move toward technê is an attempt to resurrect some ancient skill or craftsmanship, and to identify—against the efficient and inhuman technologies of modernity—an aesthetic more conducive to a romantic concept of organic wholeness” (393). Through his education in Eastern thought, Kamītī does not simply return to nature—although that is his first impulse—but in becoming the “Wizard of the Crow” and discovering his innate gifts in the art of divination he resurrects an ancient skill, combining Eastern and African philosophies, that he sees not as (tech-less) magic but aestheticized “science”—in other words, technê (Ngūgī 151). Williams demonstrates how Anglo-American “advocates of Asia-as-technê” in the early twentieth century saw the East as a means of recovering “the essence of some misplaced or as-yet-unfulfilled modern identity,” to which the West, because of its headlong immersion in “industrial life,”

was blind (393). More than simply offering an anti-modern alternative to technology, Asia-as-technê could facilitate more “therapeutic,” or more natural relationships with technology that would, in turn, lead to more “positive and organic forms of modernity outside the racialized hierarchies of traditional Western technics” (Williams 394). This is precisely how the discourse about Asia in *Wizard* functions, at least in its early forms: not as an Orientalist idealization of Eastern spirituality but as an acknowledgement that the East may offer a different and more natural path to modernity than the spiritually bankrupt, capital-driven, unnaturally-technologized model of the West.

In addition to Kamītī, one other figure in the novel represents the politically-detached, enlightenment-focused aspects of the East and reinforces the discourse of Asia-as-technê in the narrative: Gautama, proprietor of the protagonists’ favorite coffee house, The Mars Café. Gautama, who invokes the Buddha through his name, is notoriously unconcerned with politics because he is deeply and obsessively interested in space exploration. Hence the name of his establishment, which changes periodically to reflect different achievements in space travel: Sputnik, Vostok, Moonapollo, Mir Café, and International Space Station Café (Ngūgī 106). At first glance, the connotations of Gautama’s name and his interests in advanced technology seem to have nothing to do with one another, but in the discourse of Asia-as-technê, Buddhism and technology are not incommensurable. Indeed, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century US, part of Buddhism’s great appeal for influential figures like Lafcadio Hearn and Paul Caras was that it appeared to be compatible with “modern science” (Tweed 106). As J. J. Clarke writes, “Many influential thinkers have found in the natural philosophies of China and India important precedents for the swing within the physical sciences in this century from an atomistic/mechanistic mode of thinking to an organicist/holistic one” (167). Though a minor character in the novel, Gautama and his shrine to modern space exploration represent this uniquely holistic fulfillment of science through Eastern thought. Gautama most recently changed the name of his café to “Mars” because he believes the red planet to be the next frontier in space exploration where “the secrets of the origins of

life and the universe” will be discovered, and he wants the café’s name “to reflect *the eternal human quest for truth, freedom, and knowledge*” (Ngũgĩ 107; emphasis added). In Gautama’s view, technology is not something that allows humans to manipulate or dominate nature but instead to discover its mysteries and, in effect, strive for truth, freedom, knowledge—in a word, enlightenment. In this way, Gautama epitomizes the discourse of Asia-as-technê, the idea that alternative forms of modernity can be realized through Eastern perspectives on and engagements with technology and science.²⁰

Up to a point in *Wizard*, Kamītī, like Gautama, exhibits both political detachment and a belief in the alternative forms of modernity made possible by Asia-as-technê. Kamītī becomes the “Wizard” accidentally: police officers are pursuing him and Nyawīra one night early in the novel and, in order to escape, they hide in a room protected by a fake but dangerous-looking “fetish” that Kamītī hangs outside with a warning about the powerful magic of the “Wizard of the Crow,” an identity he adopts to survive in the moment (77). The police are afraid to enter, but one of them returns the next day hoping that he can employ the Wizard to help him with some personal problems. Kamītī reluctantly plays along by pretending to perform divinations, but as he begins to treat others, the successful outcomes of his supposedly fake divinations suggest that he may have some genuine powers after all, and, in fact, he later learns from his father that he is descended from a long line of African seers (293–95). Kamītī’s divination technique is interesting; though he is considered a sorcerer, he does little more than hold up a mirror to his patients and ask them to picture the source of their problems (typically an enemy of some kind). Kamītī is unusually insightful in reading the problems of his patients through their words and mannerisms, and he then appears to use the mirror to “capture” the shadows of those problems, wiping them out by scratching the mirror (117).²¹

Word soon spreads of the Wizard’s powers, and each day more and more people come to his shrine for help. Most of those who initially come are greedy business owners who want their enemies weakened. While describing the process to one such person, Kamītī observes that

“[d]ivining is a science” (151). The strangeness of this claim is not lost on the patient, who responds, “I want the pure play of occult powers. I want magic, not science” (151). Kamītī, in other words, is not a conventional sorcerer. Existing somewhere between the purely positivistic approach of the Western doctors who unsuccessfully treat the Ruler in New York and the “pure play of occult powers,” Kamītī is a “modern sorcerer” (405). He is not a slave to technology, nor is he completely against it. Instead, because we know that the source of his training lies in Eastern philosophy and religion and that it has brought out his innate powers as an African seer, we can say that Kamītī represents an African form of *Asia-as-technê*, practicing the “science” of divination by combining technology (the handheld mirror) with the arts of language (speaking and listening) and insight. As such, the politically neutral Kamītī/Wizard of the Crow at this stage suggests one way of understanding the possibility of alternative forms of modernity modeled and offered by the East. Africans need not abandon African beliefs and ways of thought in favor of those of the East, but still, as Kamītī says, “there are many things we could learn from India and other Asian countries” (55).

Chinese Gourmet and the Middle Way: The Wizard of the Crow’s Noble Sevenfold Path

Kamītī’s problematic belief that he can lead a life without political conditions, facilitated by the principles he has learned from the East, is tempered by Nyawīra’s aggressive political activism and clear disapproval of Kamītī’s position. They represent two extremes in the early stages of the novel. In the next phase of Kamītī’s development, Ngūgī explores the possibility of a “middle way” in which Kamītī begins to recognize the importance of political involvement and Nyawīra sees the positive aspects of Kamītī’s *technê-philosophy*. Just as the Ruler begins preparations for his trip to New York, Nyawīra is nearly caught by the police. She flees to Kamītī in the forest for safety—her first concession to Kamītī’s lifestyle. After resting for a few days, Nyawīra prepares to return, but this time Kamītī decides to join her: “I confess,” he says, “that I may not be able to deal with the demands and the discipline

of your movement. I am not even sure whether I want to become a member. But a fellow traveler in the journey against the evil you are fighting? Yes. . . . You and I can work together, you with matters of the body and I with those of the spirit. You women of Eldares have shown the way” (265–66). Nyawīra asks what he means by “way,” and he responds with the opening lines of the *Tao te Ching*:

*The way that can be told of is not the eternal way
The name that can be named is not the eternal name
The nameless is the origin of heaven and Earth*
(266; emphasis in original)

This invocation of the Tao is an example of one of the many Eastern texts through which Kamītī interprets his and Nyawīra’s experiences. It initiates a discussion about what the two characters can learn from one another and whether there is a way for them to work together without either compromising his or her principles. Upon returning to Eldares, they decide to hide in plain sight by dressing in traditional attire and resuming the work of the Wizard. They build a new shrine and call it “The House of Modern Witchcraft and Sorcery,” where both rich and poor are welcome (274). In addition to performing divinations, they outline a set of “seven suggestions for healthy living,” which they share with their patients:

*Take care of the body, for it is the temple of the soul
Watch ye what you eat and drink all the time
Greed makes death greedy for life
Cigarettes arrest life; alcohol holds the mind prisoner
Life is a common stream from which plant, animal, and humans
draw
The good comes from balance
Don’t abandon yours for a mirage*
(275; emphasis in original)

They call the suggestions the “Seven Herbs of Grace” (275) after one of Nyawīra’s names, but the list bears an interesting resemblance to Buddhism’s “Noble Eightfold Path,” at least in the way it addresses

physical vices and spiritual ambition. As recounted in the Pali canon of Theravada Buddhism, the Buddha once spoke to a group of monks cautioning them from indulging in the two extremes of addiction to “sense pleasures” and “self-mortification” (“Dhammacakkappavattana”). By avoiding these two extremes, the Buddha says, one can discover the “Middle Path,” which he identifies specifically as “the Noble Eightfold path, and nothing else, namely: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration” (“Dhammacakkappavattana”). Although Kamītī and Nyawīra’s points are somewhat more specific and poetic, they strive for a goal similar to that of the Buddha: a “middle path” or balance in life.²²

The resemblance between the Buddhist path and the Seven Herbs is further reinforced by the setting in which Kamītī and Nyawīra come up with the principles: they are eating in another of their favorite restaurants, Chou Chinese Gourmet. It is not unusual, of course, for such a restaurant to be in Africa—there are Chinese restaurants in cities throughout the continent. However, the restaurant is a favorite location, and the reason for this is significant. Chou Chinese Gourmet is “a *happy medium* between the high-class and the run-down restaurants, both extremes often the haunts of police intelligence” (Ngūgī 311; emphasis added). Just as Nyawīra was safe with Kamītī in his new-millennium Buddha-esque retreat in the forest, there is safety in the “happy medium” or “Middle Path” of the Chinese restaurant that is miraculously free from the dangerous politics that afflict public spaces at either extreme of the economic scale. Kamītī and Nyawīra begin sharing the Seven Herbs with all of their patients and providing food to the hungry. They designate a “holy day when people were to think of the mind and body as a wholeness that made up a person,” which they call “the Day of the Way” (275–76). Combining Taoist philosophy with the Middle Path and more specific principles tailored to African conditions, Kamītī and Nyawīra’s Seven Herbs allow them to remain in the political world where they can treat social, physical, and spiritual ailments in a holistic and organic way and, at the same time, maintain a form of political neutrality as they treat any and all

who come to them. Nyawīra does not give up her politics, but she comes to see the value of attending to things of the spirit.

Significantly, in the chapter immediately preceding the one in which the Seven Herbs are introduced, the Ruler leaves for the US. Just as the Ruler falls into the trap of Western humiliation, the Wizard reaches an apogee in his optimistic efforts to combine Eastern and African ideas. He and Nyawīra develop an African version of the Noble Eightfold Path and thereby demonstrate another possible way of envisioning a productive alliance between Africa and the East. We know, of course, that the Wizard is then called upon to treat the Ruler in New York, and, because he dispenses his assistance “without political conditions” to good and bad alike, the Wizard willingly applies his technê-divination to the Ruler, successfully diagnosing and (partially) healing him when the rigidly scientific American doctors fail. The Eastern principles that guide the Wizard in resurrecting the “ancient skill”—or technê—of divination and becoming a modern sorcerer allow him to intervene in the West’s humiliation of the Ruler (Williams 393). The Ruler is humiliated by the Global Bank’s dogged use of political conditions, and he is healed from that humiliation by the Eastern-trained modern sorcerer who offers assistance without political conditions. When read in the context of current China-African relations, this again offers a distinctly hopeful view that there may be something to China’s insistence that its model of modernization and assistance without political conditions holds promise for Africa. However, this view is exploratory at this point in the novel. I will therefore conclude by looking at the final stage in Kamītī’s progress in which the realities of African life make political detachment and neutrality impossible.

Madness as Detachment from Political Reality, or Rejecting the Buddha

As noted, Kamītī only partly heals the Ruler in New York: he releases his tongue and correctly diagnoses the disease, but he leaves before curing the Ruler’s SIE. Kamītī is prompted to return to Aburīria after having an “out of body” experience. For the second time in the

novel, in fact, Kamītī experiences a kind of astral projection in which he leaves his body and flies around the world in a “global journey in search of the source of black power” (731). He describes his experience to Nyawīra, who asks if he found the source. He replies, “Yes, in the unity of our blackness” (731). Much happens between the journey and Kamītī’s description of it late in the novel, but, most importantly, Kamītī and Nyawīra witness the Ruler’s return and subsequent assassination in a coup d’état staged by Titus Tajirika, who renames himself “Emperor Titus Flavius Vespasianus Whitehead” (753). The Ruler, to whom critics have given so much attention, suddenly disappears, only to be replaced by another who promises to outshine his predecessor with megalomaniacal flair. The Wizard is also shot (during a public gathering in which the government tries to pressure him to reveal Nyawīra’s whereabouts), but he survives, and his astral-vision of the sources of black power ultimately offers an image that contrasts with the dictatorial power that has passed, and will continue to pass, from one African Ruler to the next. Nyawīra is initially dismissive of Kamītī’s mystical journey, but when she finally takes him to meet the Central Committee of the Movement because, at last, “he wanted to become a member” (756), he sees on a wall of their hideout a map of the world with arrows pointing “at the centers of ancient black civilization” (757). “They are,” someone tells him, “the sources of black power,” and he realizes that they are the same places he visited during his astral projection, including locations throughout Africa as well as in India, the Caribbean, South America, and Fiji (757). Kamītī has come to a full awareness of the truth of Nyawīra’s belief that all things are determined by politics and that one must choose a side in the struggle for power. His discovery of the map confirms to him that his choice to join the Movement is the right one and also reveals the extent to which his—and by extension the novel’s—faith in the East has broken down. Kamītī finally recognizes the futility and impossibility of leading a life detached from political conditions.

Nyawīra gives Kamītī a tour of the Movement’s “new venture” in the Eldares mountains where they have built a utopian community grounded in African ways of living. Their farms, where they are

“working with nature, not against it,” are filled with all “varieties of Aburīrian” fruits and vegetables; their soldiers are deeply patriotic, committed to bringing about a “new Aburīria”; and their library is not only something from which they take, but, Nyawīra says, “we also have a duty to add to the common store” (758–59). In other words, Africans can learn from others but also have much to contribute. Kamītī thinks to himself that “knowledge was nothing more than the art of looking at what we already know with different eyes,” and he gains knowledge by looking at African modes of belief, thought, and ingenuity with different eyes (759). This passionate commitment to indigenous African culture—indeed, a commitment built on the assumption that alternative forms of modernity can be attained through African, rather than Western or Eastern, modes of being—does not preclude cooperation with Asia. It does, however, set certain *conditions* for cooperation. After viewing the Movement’s library, Kamītī is taken to their hospital where he was treated the night he was shot. When Nyawīra mentions that a Dr. Patel performed the surgery, Kamītī interrupts: “What? Some Aburo-Asians?” (759; “Aburo,” interestingly, would be pronounced “Afro”). Nyawīra answers, “Yes, for it does not mean that all the Asians in Aburīria support the current program of ogres. Like black Aburīrians, some work with the forces of oppression, while others toil on the side of the people” (760). Unity “across race and ethnic lines” is possible if all have chosen the correct side in the struggle for power (760). Political neutrality simply is not possible, and, as a final image of the East in the novel attests, detachment from political reality—because reality *is* political—is akin to madness.

Nyawīra and Kamītī leave the MVP headquarters and return to the streets of Eldares, observing and discussing the changes that have come about following Titus Tajirika’s rise to power. They look for their favorite coffee house, the Mars Café, but find that it has been demolished. The site is now fenced off with a sign reading, “UNDER CONSTRUCTION: GLOBE INSURANCE CORPORATION: THE TALLEST BUILDING IN AFRICA; A REAL MARCHING TO HEAVEN” (762). They worry about Gautama briefly and Kamītī suggests they go to Chou Chinese Gourmet, but Nyawīra responds

tersely, “It is a restaurant, not a coffeehouse” (762). Somehow, the “happy medium” has lost its appeal. They find another coffeehouse, which is unnamed, and later find a man sitting under a tree near the former site of *Marching to Heaven*. Nyawīra sees the man and asks, “What is he doing there all alone with legs crossed Buddha fashion?” (764) The man, they realize, is Gautama. He has hung from the tree behind him some of the things he salvaged from his café, and after his former patrons greet him, Gautama thinks he has finally found some followers. He then speaks for two paragraphs about the Ramayana, “the silence of being,” “human dreams,” and space. “Listening to what the universe is telling us,” he says, “is the only way for the nations of this our earth to come together and find union with life” (764–65). His point seems clear and not unlike what Kamītī used to preach about learning from nature, though Gautama’s perspective is more global and connects the lessons of the universe with the “nations of the earth.” However, Kamītī and Nyawīra’s response is strange: they turn their backs and walk away. The narrator then tells us, “They went away wondering if what they just saw and heard was not coming from a man who had lost his head over the loss of the Mars Café” (765). They believe Gautama has gone mad. Kamītī’s transformation over the course of the novel leads him to a point where the idea of remaining detached from political reality and searching for the secrets of nature and the universe is a form of madness. In a sense, then, he rejects the Buddha. Any philosophy, Eastern or otherwise, that does not acknowledge the fundamental nature of politics in African life is simply impractical, unsustainable, and ultimately irrational. Taking this to the wider question of China’s role in Africa, we might argue that the novel encourages distrust of China inasmuch as its leaders profess to act and give and engage without political conditions. Having explored through imaginative means what it would mean for Africa to adopt (or be adopted by) Eastern ideas and institutions, the novel directly challenges political neutrality and suggests that Africa turn not to countries like China for answers to its problems, but to itself.

Thus, after dismissing the Eastern sage, Kamītī and Nyawīra encounter another sage: a man named Arigaigai Gatherer, or A.G., a former

police officer and now renowned storyteller who has played a key role in and helped to narrate much of the novel. He was the first police officer who came to the Wizard for help, and his eccentric and enthusiastic storytelling has helped make the Wizard a legend in Aburīria. (A.G. also frequented the Mars Café earlier in the novel, overlapping for a time with the space and perhaps ambitions of Asia-as-technê.) The novel concludes with A.G. standing in the middle of a crowd, playing a traditional instrument and singing the story of the Wizard of the Crow as Nyawīra and Kamītī continue to walk, hand in hand, “the sound of the one-string violin and the man’s voice following them” (766). Robert Spencer notes the emphasis on performance in *Wizard* and the extent to which the novel formally and thematically draws attention to the “performativity” of dictatorial power and ultimately reminds us that such “power can be performed differently” (147). A.G.’s performance offers this reminder at a point in the narrative when we are left to wonder whether or not change can really occur—will the utopian experiment of the MVP prove successful or will the new dictator simply reinforce the status quo?

In emphasizing the possibility of change, A.G. invokes the tradition of *gīcaandī*, or the Gīkūyū performance tradition in which singers compete with one another in public forums, “providing a model for interpersonal and public discourse” (Gītītī 124). According to Gītahi Gītītī, the *gīcaandī* singer serves multiple functions as a “diviner/priest, investigator, philosopher, counselor, comforter, the voice of conscience” (118); furthermore, as a mode of performance characterized by “dialectical indeterminacy” (111) and competition, “[g]īcaandī is, ultimately, about self-generation and continuity: the storing of the seed for future planting involves a selection of the best” (123). A.G. inhabits the multiple roles of the *gīcaandī* tradition in this closing scene, depicting an openness to the indeterminacy of the future and a firm commitment to indigenous modes of performance, thought, belief, and practice that are better suited to establishing the conditions for the emergence of a desirable future in Africa.

Throughout the novel, as I argue, Kamītī and other characters explore and allow us to imagine what it means for Africa to embrace the

possibilities of cooperation with the East. The optimism of the early sections of the novel gives way to a growing skepticism toward anything that claims political detachment as a strength, and, ultimately, the narrative tends toward an almost complete rejection of Eastern entities that claim to offer something of value without political conditions. In so doing, the novel insists upon its own political conditions: cooperation with others, such as China or India, is still possible, but with the stipulation that all recognize the madness of political detachment—i.e., that detachment from politics is detachment from reality—and all recognize the inherent value of indigenous African forms of thought, belief, and modernity, embodied in the image of A.G. at the novel's conclusion. China's claim to political neutrality in Africa has been seriously debated by scholars and commentators, and Ngũgĩ's novel provides an imaginative means of engaging with these conversations. China should not be rejected on the basis of its revolutionary past, which is what the Ruler does, but neither should it be blindly embraced on the basis of its current claims to offer, without political conditions, a path to modernity. Ngũgĩ ultimately suggests that Africa look inward, rather than outward, for the existence of such paths and that China, India, and perhaps even the West are welcome to join these paths on the condition that they "toil on the side of the people" (Ngũgĩ 760).

Notes

- 1 The 2006 Forum was not the first meeting involving African and Chinese leaders. In fact, it was both a culmination of meetings since the late 1990s and an inauguration of new commitments and relationships on a much larger scale. Rotberg notes that this most recent era is actually the third stage in a long history of interactions between China and the African continent, the previous two having been during the Ming Dynasty in the fifteenth century and the period of decolonization in the 1960s when communist China expressed support for various independence movements, though, at the time, with no major economic motives ("Preface" vii-viii). Since China's "more recent movement away from socialism," the ties between Africa and China have grown ever deeper (Alden 38). For a more detailed account of the complex history leading up to China's new commitment to Africa, see Anshan (22–36) and Brautigam (chapters 1 and 2).

- 2 In “The Postcolonial Wizard,” for example, Gikandi describes *Wizard* as “the culmination of a long process by the novelist to overcome the ostensible gap between orality and writing” (156). Furthermore, Gikandi claims that *Wizard* is simply a “rewriting of *Devil on the Cross*,” recognizing the clear similarities between the two novels in critiquing neocolonialism (161). Ndiḡīrīḡī, like McLaren, considers the turn toward questions of globalization in *Wizard* but in the end remains preoccupied with the distance this turn implies in terms of Ngūḡī’s relationship to Kenya. The author’s “exile,” Ndiḡīrīḡī writes, “makes his view of Kenyan realities partial at best” (71), and, as a result, the novel demonstrates how “Ngūḡī embraced all of Africa as home” (74). Other approaches, such as those of Okolo and Colson, have read the novel as an imaginative exploration of an “African public sphere,” or democratic space, where “society’s values and practices” can be discussed and evaluated, but the focus tends to remain on the role that such a sphere plays in resistance to the neocolonial problems that the Ruler and his Ministers represent (Okolo 59). In focusing on such themes, Okolo recognizes that “there is nothing new in the ethical commitment of the novel,” even if that commitment is still necessary in the fight against those who “manipulat[e] power as an instrument of destruction” (64). I would amend Okolo’s observation to say that although there is nothing new in the novel’s ethical commitment to resisting Western-influenced forms of neocolonial power, there is something new in the novel’s ethical commitment to exploring new relationships with the East, as I demonstrate.
- 3 The history and implications of this phenomenon have been amply documented in the social sciences with a mass of commentary on Chinese-African relations published since 2006. Indeed, few topics have received as much attention among scholars of African politics and economics in the last several years. A partial list of the books on the phenomenon of “China in Africa” since the Forum in 2006 include: Alden, *China in Africa*; Manji and Marks, *African Perspectives on China in Africa*; Rotberg, *China into Africa*; Waldron, *China in Africa*; Brautigam, *The Dragon’s Gift*; Michel and Beuret, *China on Safari*; Raine, *China’s New African Challenges*; Taylor, *China’s New Role in Africa*; van Dijk, *The New Presence of China in Africa*; Harneit-Sievers et al., *Chinese and African Perspectives on China in Africa*; Dent, *China and Africa Development Relations*; Taylor, *The Forum on China-Africa Cooperation*; and Shinn and Eisenman, *China and Africa*.
- 4 A third possible answer to the question is that the novel could be set in the 1980s, a decade or so before China’s dramatic economic rise and consequent interest in Africa’s resources. Gikandi, for example, states that some readers will recognize the novel’s setting as at least based on “1980s Kenya,” taking Daniel Arap Moi as the most obvious corollary of the Ruler (158). However, in the same sentence, Gikandi states that the country is “unnamed,” and Ngūḡī gives it the fictional moniker “Aburīria.” Furthermore, although there are few references to

the exact temporal setting in the novel, the narrator does tell us that “this was no longer the twentieth century” (584). To assume that Ngũgĩ is simply writing about Kenya obscures the effect of the fictionalized state, which requires us to look beyond Kenya’s boundaries to see the problems of corpolonialism in other parts of Africa. Even if the novel had been set in the 1980s, its setting would not prevent it from commenting on contemporary conditions, including those created by China’s post-1980s movement into Africa. Indeed, in many of his earlier works, particularly in his orature-infused texts such as *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1976) and the unpublished musical “Mother, Sing for Me” (1982), Ngũgĩ uses historical settings and events not simply to illustrate lessons that the present can learn from the past but to challenge the hierarchical linearity of progressive time. There is a recurring effort in his work to treat past revolutionary events and “traditions” in Benjaminian terms as “charged with the time of the now” (Benjamin 261). On the topic of narrative and time in *Wizard*, see Colson’s excellent essay, “Arresting Time.”

- 5 For example, in “Help Not Wanted,” a 2007 Op-Ed for the *New York Times*, Naím expresses a view characteristic of those who see China in Africa in negative terms. China’s assistance, he writes, is “rogue aid. It is development assistance that is nondemocratic in origin and nontransparent in practice, and its effect is typically to stifle real progress while hurting ordinary citizens.”
- 6 Many Chinese and African diplomats have offered and continue to offer glowing characterizations of Chinese-African relations, and a 2008 Gallup poll indicates that in “sub-Saharan Africa, approval of China’s leadership is nearly three times as high” as it is in Europe and the Americas (Ray). Additionally, a number of important scholars also acknowledge that China’s presence in Africa is not necessarily a threat, as has often been suggested in Western media. Broadman, for example, demonstrates that “there are beneficial complementarities arising in commerce between African countries and China” (102). In response to the question, “Is China a rogue donor?” Brautigam answers, “I don’t think so. China’s rise in Africa is cause for some concern, but it need not evoke the level of fear and alarm raised by some who have condemned China’s aid and engagement as destabilizing, bad for governance, and unlikely to help Africa to end poverty” (307). She counters many of the myths about China in Africa and asserts that China’s success in raising its own people out of poverty may make them better partners for Africa than the West.
- 7 Following Williams (“Technê-Zen” 2011), I recognize that the terms “East” and “West” signify discursive and ideological constructions rather than cultural or political essences, and my use of the terms should be read with this recognition in mind. Additionally, I use the terms “East” and “Asia” interchangeably in part because the broad inclusiveness of the terms fits with the broadly inclusive nature of Ngũgĩ’s engagements with Eastern/Asian ideas and cultures in the novels, though primarily those of India and China.

- 8 For example, in a brief paper titled “China’s and India’s Investment Strategies in Africa,” Hong and Luyao note that “[c]ompared with China’s wide OFDI (outward foreign direct investment) distribution in Africa, 70% of India’s OFDI flows to Mauritius due to the large numbers of Indian immigrants there, taking advantage of the same language and similar cultural background” (i).
- 9 See Desai, “Oceans Connect”; Hofmeyr, “Universalizing the Indian Ocean”; and Jones, “The First South Asian East African Novel.”
- 10 Mankel’s crime novel *The Man from Beijing* deserves mention here. First published in Swedish in 2007 and translated into English in 2010, the novel’s plot is built at one point around China’s interests in Africa and includes a lengthy speech by a Chinese academic to a group of government officials about the need to turn to Africa for resources. Though Swedish, Mankel has spent a significant amount of time in Africa—he now lives half of each year in Mozambique, where he has no doubt seen China’s presence firsthand. My thanks to Kristin Matthews for bringing Mankel’s novel to my attention.
- 11 I am quoting here and throughout from Williams’ essay “The Technê Whim.” See also his essays “The Chinese Parrot” and “Technê-Zen” and his book *The Buddha in the Machine: Art, Technology, and The Meeting of East and West* (2014).
- 12 In several of Ngũgĩ’s essays over the years, in fact, he mentions China as one among several nations whose revolutions were instrumental in the twentieth century in bringing an end to colonialism. In *Writers in Politics* (1981), for example, Ngũgĩ locates the Mau Mau struggle in Kenya alongside other revolutionary movements throughout the world in the 1940s and 1950s, including “the Chinese revolution in 1949” (100). In the same book, the two chapters entitled “Afric-Asian Writers: The Links that Bind Us” and “Africa and Asia: The History that Refuses to be Silenced” address many of the historical connections between Africa and certain parts of Asia, including India, Korea, and China. And in *Moving the Center* (1993), Ngũgĩ writes about the successful revolutions in Cuba, Vietnam, and China as evidence of the “struggle of the living labour of the majority against the dead capital of a parasitic few” (111).
- 13 Prestige projects are part of the two-pronged strategy of symbolic diplomacy that Chinese leaders have practiced in building relations with Africa. The other prong has to do with history, or the discursive strategy of using history to make partnerships between China and Africa seem natural and necessary. In Sudan, for example—not coincidentally where the US and other Western actors have been most critical of China’s activities—Chinese leaders [pepper their] bilateral diplomatic events and official communiqués with references to General Charles “Chinese” Gordon, who helped suppress the Taiping rebellion in the 1860s, and upon being transferred to the Sudan, was put under siege and killed by the forces of the Mahdi in 1885. The Chinese claim that this event, which “finally punished” the imperialist, brings the two states closer together. (Alden 17–18)

Although referring to shared historical experiences of an explicitly political nature would seem somewhat antithetical to China's policy of political neutrality and non-interference, such "diplomatic" uses of history serve multiple purposes. In this case, Gordon becomes a sort of stand-in for the West as a whole, a concrete example of the West's colonial legacy in the global south and, therefore, a simultaneous demonstration of the weak basis for cooperation with the West and the much stronger basis for cooperation with the East. Furthermore, the use of Gordon's story constructs Sudan as fulfilling China's need for justice: he harmed us, and you punished him. By implication, this narrative allows China to approach Sudan and other African nations in the spirit of reciprocity: you saved us before, now let us save you (from economic decline, Western hegemony, etc.). Gordon is, of course, just one of several examples of historical connections between China and Africa that are used to demonstrate solidarity and provide the basis for present and future cooperation.

- 14 See the FOCAC's 2010 report, "China-Africa Trading Volume Expected to Exceed US\$100 Billion."
- 15 One other character in the novel, Titus Tajirika, experiences a similar "malady of words" that, like the Ruler's, is caused by concerns about his race (349). By having the characters' tongues stall on the word "if," not only does Ngũgĩ draw attention to another aspect of conditionality and to the tension between fantasy and reality, he may also allude ironically to the poem "If—" by Kipling, whose poem "The White Man's Burden" provides an infamous expression of the racist Western perspective that contributes to the Ruler's and Titus's illnesses. Additionally, the hyper-masculine message of "If—" forms an interesting contrast to the Global Bank's infantilization of the Ruler: *If* he had been white, then the Bank representatives would have treated him like a man and not a child.
- 16 It is not a requirement, of course, that every critic account for the title of the novel, but it is curious how few readings of the novel devote significant attention to the titular "hero" and focus instead on the Ruler and related neocolonial themes and formal issues as discussed above. These are important topics, but the tendency to over-emphasize the centrality of the dictator (which is what every dictator wants—all of the attention) begs the question: Why is the novel not titled *The Ruler*, in the same way, for example, Foden's novel about Idi Amin is titled *The Last King of Scotland* (1998), Soyinka's satirical dictator play is titled *A Play of Giants* (1984), and numerous Latin American dictator novels are named after their central antagonists (e.g., *El Señor Presidente* [1946] by Asturias; *I, the Supreme* [1974] by Roa Bastos; and, among others, *The Autumn of the Patriarch* [1975] and *The General in His Labyrinth* [1989] by Márquez)? The title of Ngũgĩ's novel suggests that it is not, or at least not only, a dictator novel and that the Wizard's storyline is perhaps more important, in the end, than that of the Ruler. Gikandi notes that the novel's title references a legendary wizard in Gikũyũ folklore and, in fact, comes from "a composite of traditional stories fea-

- turing the Wizard of the Crow as a character” (161). However, because Kamiti is not the original Wizard of the Crow but simply appropriates the name, almost by accident, understanding the folkloric origins of his name does not entirely explain why Ngũgĩ chose to title the novel after this particular character.
- 17 In addition to Alden, see, for example, Naím, Shinn, and the variety of positions explored in *Chinese and African Perspectives*, ed. by Harneit-Sievers et al.
 - 18 These antics also recall the phenomenon of “medical tourism,” which is “where patients travel overseas for operations and various invasive therapies” (Connell x). Connell notes that medical tourism “has grown rapidly since the late 1990s, especially for cosmetic surgery” (x).
 - 19 Readers familiar with Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* will recognize this reference to “chi” as the “personal god that helps to determine the fortune of each individual” in Igbo society (Booker 52).
 - 20 As I note at the beginning of this essay, my aim of reading *Wizard* in the context of China’s specific policies and activities in Africa does not depend upon the text only referencing China. However, it is interesting to note that although Buddhism originated in India, the nation with the largest Buddhist population today is China. (See the Pew Forum’s report on the “Global Religious Landscape” in 2010.) A contemporary Gautama, therefore, should refer us to China as clearly as it does to India. Additionally, on the topic of China, Africa, and space travel, it is interesting to note former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo’s remarks to Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2006: “The twenty-first century is the century for China to lead the world. And when you are leading the world, we want to be close behind you. *When you are going to the moon, we don’t want to be left behind*” (qtd. in Michel and Beuret 11; emphasis added).
 - 21 Mirrors, of course, have been associated with magic and mystical powers throughout history and in various cultures (“mirror, mirror on the wall. . .”), but it is interesting to note a recent scientific utilization of mirrors in healing problems of the mind. The innovative neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran—whom *Time* magazine once named one of the one hundred most influential people in the world—famously discovered a way to cure amputees of pain in their “phantom limbs” by using a mirror to create the illusion that the patient’s missing limb is still intact. Ramachandran has published widely on this technique, which he calls “Mirror Visual Feedback,” or MVF (see, for example, Ramachandran’s “Use of Visual Feedback” and Colapinto’s “Brain Games”). Whether or not Ngũgĩ knew about these experiments with MVF, which were introduced in the 1990s, Ramachandran’s aestheticized low-tech approach to treating “brain function” bears a fascinating similarity to the Wizard’s divination techniques, which he considers to be more science and art than magic.
 - 22 In addition to the Eightfold Path, the Buddha discusses “seven factors of Awakening” in the Pali canon, which may be what the “Seven Herbs” are patterned after (“Himavanta”). However, seven is also the Ruler’s “sacred number” which he

invests with mystical significance (Ngũgĩ 12). Thus, I believe Ngũgĩ has Kamiti and Nyawira list seven in order partly to re-appropriate and thereby undermine one aspect of the Ruler's discourse of power.

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