

## Ubuntu/Guanxi and the Pragmatics of Translation

Thinking from the South is necessarily an endeavor of translation: between scales of representation and materiality, between ontology and epistemology, and crucially between chronotopes of encounter.<sup>1</sup> As such, thinking from the South, in its very proposition, is compelled to shift the interzone of encounter from the west and a world full of its aspirationally cosmopolitan Others to a more horizontal, and thus ultimately more multilingual, conception of intersubjective *interactions* and collaboratively *translated* personhoods—these being interactions and translations that unfold in a world of mutually negotiated alterities that resist the flat, commensurative relativisms of Anglo multiculturalism in a still-decolonizing world. For a generation of postmodernists, exploring such fraught social interzones of endlessly becoming alterity seemed to induce a representational delirium, leading to an initially ecstatic rejection of so-called structure and translation, eventually culminating in the awkward, privileged avoidance of society and the human altogether. This remains the intellectual equivalent of retreating into a gated community—away from the unsettling discomfort of an increasingly stratified world. Destabilizing this logic, as I began to suggest in the preceding chapter, entails the embrace of translation as an intersubjective imperative and social fact, without the expectation of universal commensurability that remains appropriately impossible in a multilingual world.

In this chapter, I take this approach further and explore the indispensability of translation as social practice not only in the particular instance of Afro-Chinese interactions, but in the broader context of non-western encounters beyond the settler-colonial encounter. This is a step that I hope will be of benefit to many projects of intellectual decolonization that take thinking from the South as their starting point. Demonstrating a pragmatics of postcolonial translation, I analyze the reflexive, intersubjective mediation of Southern African and Chinese “culture”

concepts—those of *Ubuntu* and *guanxi*—as my primary example for discussion. I begin with a discussion of affinities between these concepts as they have been written about, or publicly contextualized in some of their respective genealogies. I then move to a discussion of their reflexive translation in contemporary Afro-Chinese encounters. Following this, I conclude with a discussion about how a pragmatics of translation intervenes in a number of popular non-representational or anti-translational literatures in the western social sciences.

In their independent and synthesized contextualizations, *Ubuntu* and *guanxi* share a general feature of “intersubjective interdependency”—a convergence of interpretations that has allowed many African students in China to not only treat the respective cultural ideologies of *Ubuntu* and *guanxi* as malleable enough to permit a translation of one into the other; but also the capacity to reflexively re-purpose the pragmatic deployment of these concepts for limited gains within a still-inequivalent context of encounter and exchange. In line with these observations, and drawing on the shared intersubjective sensibilities of *guanxi* and *Ubuntu*, I understand translation—always simultaneously interpersonal and intertextual—as a pragmatics of mediating incommensurability. Thus, translation is not only an immanent capacity that always entails the acknowledgement of difference in the abstract analytical sense, it should also be understood as a vital and inevitable social process that is both reflexively referred to and relied upon to permit transformations of social and material worlds without reducing cultural concepts—like *Ubuntu* or *guanxi*—to arbitrary propositions under the banner of cultural relativism.

In addition to facilitating the observation of social dynamics, a pragmatics of translation and its contingent translational attunement has implications for methodology and research ethics more broadly. The research orientation such an approach necessitates is that encounters and interactions are never single events, but ultimately encompass a wider social context as well as socio-spatiotemporal trajectories that are evidenced through interactions. What the reader may initially discern as a series of “individual encounters” in the context of an interaction-based ethnography is a misleading understanding of what happens between the ethnographic context and the subsequent representational act of ethnographic writing—historical or anthropological.

“Single” interactions are meant to diagram, with depth, positionalities, contexts, and dispositions that are occupied by a broad range of subjects over time in the ethnographic context. It would be profoundly monolingual—in the Lockean sense—to believe that an ethnographic interaction represents (a) a singular event, and (b) “real” people, since textual representations are extensions of social realities as opposed to the realities themselves. Just as no large-scale quantitative survey will ever capture why subjects, collectively, behave the way they do, an interactional analysis is by its very nature incomplete. This is because no

interaction is ever a social isolate—given that they encompass a distillation of language, performances, and ideas that are never, and have never been, the sole authorial objects of interlocutors. Understanding that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the number of interview subjects and the possibilities of their alignments, perspectives, opinions, and personae, it is inevitably the ethnographer who—through mediating between ethnographic context, research institutions, writing, and critical reception—is undertaking the burden of qualitative exploration and evidence-based argumentation. Here, I can only claim that my informants and their social milieu were observed in depth, in a context full of informants, longitudinally, and that I conducted over two hundred interviews over a period of four years. However, should the reading audience really be persuaded by me or any other ethnographer simply saying so in a methodology or a footnote, especially when a chapter that is eight thousand words long can only accommodate a fragmentary representative sample from years of observation and interviews? These are disciplinary and conceptual biases that my work is directly aiming to write against and thus, the interactions explored in this book are precisely a reaction to default ethnographic textures (as they are commensurated in much contemporary American anthropology) that attempt to perform ethnographic multiplicity which ultimately reduces the depth of ethnographic insight.

#### BEYOND SYNCHRONIC GUANXI

In western anthropologies of Chinese *guanxi* (M. Yang 1994; Bian 1994; Kipnis 1997; Bell 2000), the concept has often been understood through two of its more obvious iterations. First, it might manifest in many Chinese social settings in a variety of modalities, including the exchange of gifts like luxury goods or “red envelopes” (that contain money), patronage and patrimony networks (particularly in government institutions), as well as an array of functional and dysfunctional techniques, tactics, and economies of corruption. This latter kind of *guanxi* has been the central theme and focus of a number of MBA-style courses and guidebooks providing financial guru-like advice on “how to do networking in China.” However, this MBA-style *guanxi* caters to a more western and instrumentally inclined understanding of the short-term and transactional appearances of *guanxi*. Critiquing such token essentialisms of *guanxi*—both their self-help appropriations and Orientalisms within Euro-American corporate literature and education—a number of anthropologists of (but mostly not *from*) China have pointed out how such approaches run the risk of reducing *guanxi* to a purely instrumental social practice, lacking specificity in its hyper-local Chinese context. Here, *guanxi*’s more ethical or practice-based dimensions appear to be “rescued” by scholars like Andrew Kipnis (1997). For Kipnis, in particular, *guanxi* has a mutually constitutive affinity with another Chinese concept of intersubjectivity, one that is inseparable from *guanxi*’s contextual and co-textual meanings: *renqing*. Building

on French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) work, Kipnis suggests that *renqing* emerges within a simultaneously 'embodied' and "compassionate" habitus that *guanxi* sustains and is sustained by—intersubjectively—between persons mutually committed to maintaining habitus in a mainly nonreflexive, "beneath conscious" manner. Following Kipnis, *guanxi* exists in a dis-articulable equilibrium with *renqing*. Following his former teacher, anthropologist Judith Farquhar (2002), it can additionally be argued that *guanxi* might do so in ways that are simultaneously particular to, and reiterated through, embodied practices that both constitute and are constituted within an intersocial space-time: that of an anthropologically delineable community, society, or polity (Munn 1986; Bourdieu 1977).

However, at the heart of this rescue attempt by western anthropologists of China, there is a persistent tension between cultural determinism and emergence of the everyday. In much of this west-to-Other anthropology, *guanxi* and *renqing*—still read through an Orientalist gaze—are unproblematically maintained through the work of the everyday. In much of this writing, which negates the dialectical in favor of the linear-descriptive, it is as though *guanxi* were hermetically sealed from the continuous remaking and redefining of its meanings through interactions among those for whom *guanxi* matters. There is still a presupposition that the definer and reader of cultural terms and concepts is able to observe a synchronic durability of *guanxi*, which somehow overshadows, and yet escapes the notice of, those undertaking the labor of *guanxi*'s diachronic maintenance. A way past this contradiction may be attendance to interactional and intercultural contextualizations of *guanxi* that take seriously the reflexive, diachronic mediation of such ideas not only among subjects who believe they own such concepts, but also for their interlocutors who believe they have cultural analogues for the same ideas. Such an approach, to be sure, would be more dialogical and dialectical by its very nature. In this vein, it will be argued that culture concepts like *guanxi* have a vibrant cultural and historical life in Sino-Other encounters that entail third-worldist histories and genealogies.

#### FROM GUANXI TO UBUNTU

Diverging from the inalienable romance of cultural synchrony, what I argue and demonstrate aligns with a few important (if somewhat marginalized) critical theoretical analyses that have attended to the ways China continues to make itself through making its others—particularly in relation to the play of external and internal forces that are necessarily ideological and political in the making of culture (F. Yang 2015; Rofel 2007; P. Liu 2015; L. Liu 2004; Vukovich 2012). Importantly, such approaches do not provincialize the cultural but understand culture as very much at stake in the vibrant making and contestation of social life under the predatory as well as contradictory conditions of cultural alienation and appropriation that typify the experience of modernity in postcolonial and postsocialist

settings. *Guanxi* is both a cultural and (self-)Orientalized culture term that has had a vibrant life in pre- and postsocialist China, and has seen its fair share of colonial translations and reductions. *Guanxi*'s reflexive referability—manifested in a vast range of “*guanxi*-talk” across time, space, and languages—makes it both a contested and ideal lens through which to explicate the tension between intercultural awareness and cultural fetishism that haunts even the most mundane interaction between mutually constituted others, particularly in the context of Afro-Chinese cultural translations.

*Guanxi*, for many Chinese, thus imbricates a meta-awareness of intersubjectivity as social practice, which is made apparent through *guanxi* talk. *Guanxi*, in this sense shares affinities with the trans-Southern African intelligibility of *Ubuntu* as not only a similar moral and ethical contingency that animates intersubjective relations, mediations, or supernatural efficacies; but once again is an idea that is reflexively accessible through *Ubuntu*-talk. My emphasis in this chapter is on *Ubuntu*-talk as a living, intersubjective object of cultural reference and as a translational analog for *guanxi* in Afro-Chinese encounters. Here, I am *not* engaging *Ubuntu* as analytical proposition in contemporary African and Africa-engaged analytical philosophy, as demonstrated in the debate between Matolino and Kwindingwi (2013), Metz (2014); and the subsequent commentary by Chimakonam (2016). My response to this issue is that—regardless of the logical propositions of the life, death, or afterlives of *Ubuntu* as analytical object—*Ubuntu* remains rehearsed and discursively under continuous maintenance in the “language games” of those for whom the existence of *Ubuntu* remains indispensable. Following Michael Silverstein's (2004, 621–22) elaborate discussion of the discursive maintenance of “cultural concepts,” it might be analytically expedient to grant *Ubuntu*'s pragmatic and public materiality as a portable and transmissible discourse object, beyond its suffocating reduction to existential binarism.

In this more public and pragmatic realm, *Ubuntu*'s ethical and co-textual dependency—that is, its reliance on reception as much as representation—has been articulately captured by African language and literary scholar James Ogude: “In the Nguni saying popularized by [Desmond] Tutu, ‘Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu’ (a person is only a person in relation to other persons), the idea is that no individual can become a person without the role played by other individuals and by society more wholly and generally. In other words, humans are made to be interdependent with each other. Humans realize and fulfill their selfhood only in interplay with others as a moral and metaphysical destiny” (Ogude 2019, 4).

It is important, however, that the moral and ethical contingencies of *Ubuntu* might also include witchcraft. As with *guanxi*, *Ubuntu* is as much the condition of possibility for mutually beneficial social relations, as it affords propensities for mutual destruction. Such transcendental ethical propensities have been partially—though not fully—explored in the innovative work of Adam Ashforth, where he frames witchcraft's contingent relationship with *Ubuntu*—witchcraft as a kind

of “dark matter” of *Ubuntu* (2005). In his excellent *Madumo: A Man Bewitched* (2000), Ashforth demonstrates this principle at work in the life of his friend and informant Madumo, who must counter the effects of witchcraft directed toward him through his close kin ties, as those very ties are the source of the witchcraft as well as the means for combating it. In Madumo’s bewitching, *Ubuntu*—as the mutually constitutive force that engenders one’s personhood through others—is the metaphysical infrastructure that permits both the efficacy of witchcraft and commonality of personhood between subjects.

In this vein, anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff (2012, 102) have described *Ubuntu* as “a common African humanity” that has profound consequences for how we understand the nature of reflexive personhood maintenance as a feature of Southern African social life across cultural communities. In popular culture, *Ubuntu* is often explained in English through the phrase, “I exist because you exist,” and by a number of commentators including notable public figures like South Africa’s Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela. This double-edged public life of *Ubuntu* permits insights into exploring the dark side of *guanxi*—namely, *fubai* (“corruption”)—a relation that anthropologist Cheryl Schmitz’s recent exploration of witchcraft “translation” in the context of Sino-Angolan encounters evocatively suggests but does not quite articulate (2020). With the exception of this excellent work, Chinese and western Sinologists have been somewhat loath to explore the relationship between *guanxi* and its dialectically negating shadow: witchcraft.

By contrast, attention to the everyday governance of China reveals a fairly explicit public awareness of *guanxi*’s corrupting or *fubai* affordances. In both rural and urban settings in the PRC, this public awareness is manifested officially, not only in the form of large-scale anti-corruption campaigns, but also at the marginal scale of everyday policing where public messaging ubiquitously warns passers-by of the inveigling influence of “dark forces” (*heishili*)—referring to criminal, political, or religious fundamentalist underworlds. China observers attuned to the discursive transformations of public anti-corruption advocacy in the PRC would not fail to have noticed a recent historical sequence of anti-corruption political campaigns: starting from the “fighting the tiger” (*dalaohu*) campaign in 2013—metaphorically meaning to persecute corrupted government leaders—and then followed by the “squashing the flies altogether” (*dahu paiying*) campaign, referring to the purging of mid-level corrupt officials, one sees a steady propaganda build-up to eliminating “the dark and evil forces” (*hei e shili*) that began around 2018, targeting kinship-based organized crime. In this discursive shift it would be difficult to miss the escalating degree of insidiousness of these campaigns—from tigers to flies to dark and evil forces—a shift that mirrors the shrinking distance between public criminality and the intimate realm of the “common person” (*putong ren*).

It would be both anachronistic and overly simplistic to view Chinese corruption’s witchcraft-like manifestation in relation to *guanxi* as a byproduct of the spectral machinations of neoliberalism operating in the shadows of

Sino-governmentality—particularly given that there is nothing spectral, cabalistic, or “hidden in the shadows” about the PRC’s relationship to capital. Rather, outside of western Sinology, there is a much older genealogy of thought exploring the dualistic—both loving and corrupting—dimensions of *guanxi*. This genealogy is associated with (arguably) China’s most famous anthropologist, Fei Xiaotong. Contrasting the intersubjective ethical pluralism of Chinese social relations with western social organizational principles based on monotheistic moral centrism, Fei Xiaotong famously outlined what he calls societies with a “differential mode of association.” By way of Mencius, he analyzes the interactional basis of intersubjective ethics, while also demonstrating his own pragmatics of translation in analyzing cultural concepts like *guanxi*:

Mencius replied, “A benevolent man neither harbors anger nor nurses resentment against a brother. All he does is to love him. Because he loves him, he wishes him to have rank. Because he loves him, he wishes him to be rich. [For the emperor to love his brother] was to enrich [his kin] and let him have rank. If as emperor he had allowed his brother to remain a common man, could that be described as loving him?”

A society with a differential mode of association is composed of webs woven out of countless personal relationships. To each knot in these webs is attached a specific ethical principle. For this reason, the traditional moral system was incapable of producing a comprehensive moral concept. Therefore, all the standards of value in this system were incapable of transcending the differential personal relationships of the Chinese social structure. The degree to which Chinese ethics and laws expand and contract depend on a particular context and how one fits into that context. (Fei [1947] 1992, 78)

For Mencius and Fei Xiaotong, interaction and ethics are fundamentally intertwined—there are no ethics without interactions to recruit them, and no interactions without ethical maintenance. Here, Fei Xiaotong also demonstrates the translational implications of web-like contingencies of intersubjective relations decades before Geertz. Elaborating on the ethical capaciousness of *guanxi*, he continues:

I have heard quite a few friends denounce corruption, but when their own fathers stole from the public, they not only did not denounce them but even covered up the theft. Moreover, some went so far as to ask their fathers for some of the money made off the graft, even while denouncing corruption in others. When they themselves become corrupt, they can still find comfort in their “capabilities.” In a society characterized by a differential mode of association, this kind of thinking is not contradictory. In such a society, general standards have no utility. The first thing to do is to understand the specific context: Who is the important figure, and what kind of relationship is appropriate with that figure? (78)

As with *Ubuntu*, persons are maintained through their mutual contingencies—both through their ethical recruitment and through their seemingly contradictory yet ultimately dialectical ethical propensities (Lukács 2010). There is no



ethics of *guanxi* without its contingent propensities for corruption, just as there is no *Ubuntu* without its propensity for witchcraft. Conversely, a consideration of Fei Xiaotong and China's contemporary public anti-corruption discourses should prompt us to ask why such similar social insights and intersubjective contingencies have (with few exceptions) not been taken seriously in the context of Southern African governance. Particularly in the context of South African corruption discourse, consideration of Fei Xiaotong's ethical pragmatics would quickly demonstrate the limits of referring to government corruption as antithetical to *Ubuntu* as a naively incorruptible intersubjective ethics.

### PRAGMATICS OF TRANSLATION

Having highlighted a few grounds for contiguity in discussing *guanxi-Ubuntu* translations, and having speculated about certain grounds for their comparison or shared affinities, a question must be addressed: How do contemporary Chinese and African actors pragmatically bring *guanxi* and *Ubuntu* and their intersubjective underpinnings into a shared field of recognition and reflection? Answering this question necessarily entails identifying and "siting" translation as pragmatic imperative between African and Chinese subjects (Niranjana 1992).

As Tejaswini Niranjana has suggested, the act of translation—considered capaciously—is a political act. As such, political acts are by their nature pragmatic and performative acts in that *doing* and *defining* become inextricable semiotic events. Building on this approach to translation, what follows will draw on a long genealogy of pragmatist thought, including the ideas of several anti-imperialist and third-worldist thinkers, from Du Bois (1903) to Mills and Gerth (1953). At the same time, I must qualify that I understand pragmatist thought as something that is not merely reducible to William James, Charles Peirce, and the Johns (Dewey and Austin), but rather part of a shared humanistic heritage of thought—one in which ideas are understood as constituted through, as well as constitutive of, reflexive processes of mediation. An example of this heritage is demonstrated in the pragmatic sensibility through which Fei Xiaotong interprets the ethical and pragmatic imbrications as well as genealogies of Chinese (and indeed other) intersubjective modalities of social organization—ideas that have been around at least since the early versions of the *Dao De Jing*, *The Analects*, and *The Mencius*. These genealogies have further been transformed, maintained, and syncretized via Neo-Confucians and a broad range of East Asian literary and historical scholars down to the present.

At the same time, a pragmatics of translation opposes the understanding that culture is the exclusive analytical object of anthropologists who are uniquely situated to identify, translate, and study it. Rather, it prompts us to embrace the fact that cultural translation is an almost mundane reality in most societies that must confront diverse human interactions as their simultaneously ethical and



pragmatic foundations—culture *does*, life is *lived*, and translation is *done*, regardless of “loss” or anyone’s semiotic nihilism. Actual intercultural, interlinguistic, and intersubjective translations—those happening between persons reflexively invested in receptional and representational labor—are pragmatic translations. Their pragmatic effects and reflexive meta-semantics—that is, their definability as translational events—constitute perhaps the closest thing to a “bounded” or “defined” semiotic subject, object, process, or “event.” Understood in this vein, a pragmatics of translation opposes the conventional semantic or metaphysical concern with cultural translation as cause for existential dread and liberal horror in much of the Anglocentric western academy. This position necessarily proposes that we can in fact have pragmatic translatability and intersectional incommensurability at the same time. As the Americans might say: “We can walk and chew gum at the same time.” The subsequent discussion provides a unique opportunity to demonstrate an example of what this might look like.

#### FROM UBUNTU TO GUANXI

Drawing on a key series of interactions that emerged during my dissertation work ([Ke-]Schutte 2018, Ke-Schutte 2019), I will now discuss a situation where mediation between *guanxi* and *Ubuntu* becomes a key site for excavating a pragmatics of translation. In a research period between 2012 and 2016 in Beijing’s Haidian district, I frequently observed one informant, Patrice Moji, making statements about his shared cosmopolitanism with various interlocutors: Chinese, African, and white “internationals.”<sup>22</sup> He was a senior master’s student who had been living in Beijing for a few years. Patrice was one of my informants and regarded himself as a cultural translator between Chinese and African students in Beijing. From these interactions, I gathered that Patrice believed there to be a privileged position of mobility that permitted one to be situated as a translator, that cosmopolitan aspiration was a condition of possibility for translation: “You cannot be a translator unless you have gone from one place to another,” he once noted. Elaborating on his claims of cosmopolitanism, he compared Beijing’s obvious mass urbanism to the contrasting spaces of both his childhood background in southern Zimbabwe as well as his experiences as an undergraduate student in South Africa—the place where we first met a few years prior while Patrice was an undergraduate.

On one occasion, I learned that Patrice’s teacher, Professor Li was holding a banquet for a group of his students. Professor Li, who I also knew as an informant, was a Chinese language and literature professor at Da Hua University—a pseudonym for one of the most elite educational institutions in Beijing. In addition to Patrice, Professor Li had reached out to me with an invitation. During the elaborate dinner—which included Peking duck, double-cooked pork, fried string beans, and a number of other delicacies (with rice only served on request)—Patrice

told a story about his grandfather's travels to China and the Soviet Union as a Zimbabwean diplomat. He explained that many in his clan had middle names indicative of his grandfather and family's political alignments: Marx, Mao, Lenin, Fidel, and Trotsky abound on family birth records.

As I have indicated elsewhere, Patrice's overly elaborate setup was very much intentional and directed toward establishing a third-world socialist rapport with Professor Li, given that he desperately needed Professor Li's letter of recommendation to maintain his scholarship at Da Hua University (Ke-Schutte 2019). Before and after the banquet, Patrice reflexively noted that he was building rapport as an instrumentalization of *guanxi*—a conceptual vocabulary he acquired after arriving in China. Patrice's labor was explicated during a climactic moment during the banquet ritual, where participants are meant to toast the professor in brief, laudatory speeches—a common practice during relatively frequent teacher-graduate student gatherings in the Chinese academy. Patrice raised a glass of liquor (*baijiu*) and proclaimed: *Disan shijie da tuanjie!* (“To third-world solidarity!”) Acknowledging Patrice, Professor Li responded in deliberate English, while obviously noting my presence as the white anthropologist at the table, whose alignments were uncertain. Looking at me, Professor Li seemed to make up his mind and stated (by way of translation): “Third-world solidarity!” as though Patrice's toast not only required translation, but that I needed to be appraised of who it included (and perhaps who it did not).

I learned from both parties later that Professor Li had in fact written the elicited letter of recommendation. Whether engineered or coincidental, this was taken by Patrice as evidence of both his prowess in managing social relations as well as the ritual efficacy of historical invocation—that he had pragmatically deployed *guanxi* through his own translation of it.

A few days following the banquet, I met with Professor Li to discuss what had transpired. Since *guanxi* was a regular topic of conversation between us and having benefitted on multiple occasions from Professor Li's *guanxi*, I couldn't resist the opportunity to gauge his reflexive awareness of Patrice's engineered hailing. The position he held at his university was officially academic professor; however, due to his social connections and skills in acquiring them, he was more known as a highly talented broker between educational, political, and private sector interactional spaces. In a Chinese bureaucratic setting, he would easily be understood as the *guanxi* artist or manager of an institution—an unofficial, but indispensable position in most Chinese organizations. As I have noted, beyond just being “someone who networks well,” a *guanxi* artist is someone who is particularly skilled at recognizing, building, and maintaining *guanxi* relationships (Ke-Schutte 2019). For Professor Li, the emphasis on an aptitude for recognition and reception as imbricated translational processes—rather than on performance and production of instrumentalized rapport—was an important nuance in distinguishing the effective management of *guanxi* from competent networking.

By the accounts of Professor Li's own peers, he was such an excellent manager of *guanxi* "that he was able to send his children to [an Ivy League] university in America."

Perhaps as part of this skill set, Professor Li also mastered a genre of self-exoticism that I had seen him perform with predominantly white visiting scholars and officials from US institutions with whom his institution had formed beneficial ties. In these interactions with his US visitors, he had to manage two performances. On the one hand, he had to advertise China's emerging, cosmopolitan educational status, while on the other, he needed to advertise himself as an expert on socialist political or administrative protocol in China: a translator of otherwise "inscrutable" signs to his American colleagues. This dual performance allowed him to motivate his own indispensability. Beyond his obvious skill at managing *guanxi*, Professor Li was also uncharacteristically keen to engage in a genre of *guanxi* talk, in which he was willing to reflexively discuss making *guanxi* in detail and at length.

He noted that it wasn't merely about giving people money or things, emphasizing that this was "the lowest *guanxi*." Instead, he noted the centrality of contextual self-awareness: "who you are" and "what you have" and that, in turn, this awareness should be extended to "who others are to you." This contextually shifting relationship between you-to-others, and others-to-you, underpins the central question in the *guanxi* interaction: "Why would I spend my time on *guanxi* with others?" Here, he emphasized that in the cultivation of *guanxi* relationships, we needed *to want to spend time on others*. This degree of sincerity, however instrumental it may obviously be, is an essential part of making *guanxi*. "Take you, for instance," he noted to my slight alarm. "You have a good attitude, but as someone from Africa, you are not as useful to me as an American graduate student or professor. [However], you are easier to build a relationship with, and if there is mutual benefit, that is a good thing for both of us. . . . You and I both have to understand and meet our mutual obligations to each other . . . otherwise we sabotage one another" (Ke-Schutte 2019, 328). The importance of sincerity is demonstrated in Professor Li's invocation of attitude. Both seem to matter in calculating whether to commit to a *guanxi* relationship or not, since "attitude" would be a strong indicator of an interlocutor's willingness to reciprocate and maintain the relationship—one that precariously might leave both interlocutors vulnerable to sabotage, or possibly witchcraft.

Seeing an opportunity to shed light on his earlier interaction with Patrice, I asked whether the two of them had a *guanxi* relationship. He responded emphatically that they did not, adding: "I don't mean to sound like a bad person, but he can't offer me anything since he is only a student" (Ke-Schutte 2019, 328). Given that Professor Li wrote many recommendations for his student and also aligned himself—at least performatively—with Patrice's recruitment to third-world solidarity, a question emerges: Is conscious, or, perhaps more accurately, reflexive

knowledge about being in a *guanxi* relationship a necessary and sufficient condition to deny its emergence in an interaction?

This question certainly proved to be at stake in Patrice Moji's interpretation of the exchange at the banquet, as well as its aftermath. When I asked him about it, Patrice provided a translation of his own. He understood *guanxi* to be a fundamentally translatable and, in fact, substitutable with another intersocial category drawn from social settings that were mutually intelligible to us: *Ubuntu*. "Look, it [guanxi] is *the same as* Ubuntu." Patrice's own translation attempts an iconizing equivocation of *Ubuntu* as being "the-same-as" *guanxi*.

This iconizing modality of interactions, where the motivation of sameness is at stake, has been evocatively captured in the work of anthropologist Summerson Carr. Interpreting the pragmatist philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce, she notes the ways in which iconic signs "gain their meaning in a contiguous relation to their object (as in the case of smoke and fire) and also from symbols, which have an arbitrary (that is, conventional) relationship with that which they represent," that—following Peirce—"iconic signs are necessarily 'motivated.'" In this sense icons are "the product of the analogic practices of language users as they selectively establish relationships of likeness . . . [gaining] their meaning not because they naturally resemble some unmediated thing in the world but instead because a community of speakers collectively designates that one kind of thing is like and therefore can come to stand for another" (Carr 2011, 26).

Beyond drawing equivalences between words—since Carr's work is focused on interactional settings where interlocutors have an overlapping language community—Patrice's translation of *Ubuntu* into *guanxi* brings entire notions of intersubjective space-time in relation to one another. The resulting effect is not only the augmentation of the social-semiotic range of *guanxi*, but also that of *Ubuntu*. Furthermore, rather than essentializing both *Ubuntu* and *guanxi*, Patrice's pragmatic translation via iconization of these concepts should perhaps be understood as an attempt to bridge very different theories of social relations that nonetheless allow for intersubjective contingencies and their personhoods: a cultural translation as a transnationally portable resource.

In my own attempt to provoke Patrice's meta-talk of translation—perhaps mirroring what Peter Mwepikeni (2018) has depicted as an abuse of the *Ubuntu* concept to further neoliberal extraction in the guise of Rainbow Nationalism—I responded to his transfiguration with a well-known quip among fellow South and Southern African students: "I thought *Ubuntu* was dead?" (Ke-Schutte 2019, 329). For many post-apartheid and postcolonial subjects, this more cynical take on *Ubuntu* is often suggestive of alienations or anomic disillusionments of various forms (Durkheim [1893] 2013). From the ties of kinship and basic human compassion to a corrosion of cultural forms of belonging and emplacement typified by increasing and destructive commitments to self-interest. These conditions are furthermore understood as eradicating the

underlying ethical space-time of *Ubuntu* through which one might be or become a person through other persons (Makgoba 1999, 153). Responding to my pessimism, Patrice noted: “maybe *Ubuntu* is dead for us, but *guanxi* is alive for them” (Ke-Schutte 2019, 329). Pragmatically, Professor Li’s letter-writing constituted sufficient evidence—for Patrice—that a translatability between *guanxi* and *Ubuntu* did exist.

Importantly, neither *guanxi* nor *Ubuntu* are terms that can fully represent an inalienable cultural romance for Professor Li and Patrice. On one occasion after a failed meeting with an associate, Professor Li lamented: “You know, *guanxi* has really changed. When I was young, giving a person a ride in a truck or feeding them some dumplings was enough [to secure loyalty for life]. Now [this is] not the case. . . . You know, under Mao, *guanxi* was a lot more real . . . look, I’m not saying [the Cultural Revolution] was a good time, but *guanxi* meant more because it was all [we] had” (Ke-Schutte 2019, 330).

#### CONCLUSION: FROM A SEMANTICS TO A PRAGMATICS OF TRANSLATION

The preceding interactions with and between Professor Li and Patrice Moji demonstrate a pragmatics of translation—one drawn from an actual micro-interaction (as opposed to those announced, yet seldom demonstrated, by a number of American Foucaultian devotees). This approach contrasts with much current China-Africa related scholarship, particularly research situated in China, which has concerned itself mainly with macro-scale phenomena often providing compelling insights concerning political and economic dimensions of Sino-African interactions (Bodomo 2012; King 2013; Chang et al. 2013; Brautigam 2009; Li et al. 2012; Snow 1989). These studies rigorously attempt to delineate and summarize the various strategic interests of China, African nation states, and a conspicuously silent western audience, often marshaling vast swathes of data to depict very large social formations on a continental scale. As Kenneth King (2013) has noted, however, our picture of the actual people involved in this interaction remains incomplete. This is troubling since, at least from my preliminary research, it appears that what constitutes the capacities for intersubjective personhood is very much at issue in measuring the success or value of an educational development initiative the scale of which is unprecedented on the African continent. “Who Africans are,” and “who Africans are capable of being”—to themselves, their sponsors, their communities, as well as other aspirational or elite audiences—depends largely on acquiring and performing capacities to speak, network, and move without cultural constraints in a Chinese world. It is the recruitment of translation in the service of such goals that is at issue in actual face-to-face interactions between Africans and Chinese as non-western interlocutors that must cultivate their own trans-languages (Hanks 2010). But, how does a pragmatics of translation—in the still decolonizing

South—unsettle the post-translational lament of the Northern academic Anglo-sphere? By way of extended conclusion, I hope to meditate on how a pragmatics of translation might productively engage a number of “settled” assumptions around what Gayatri Spivak once termed “the politics of translation” (1993).

Translation, in the explicitly linguistic sense, has been a central concern for literary theory (Spivak 1993; Sakai 1997) in ways that it has not been for anthropologists, who in the past have borrowed or recruited terms like *mana* or *hau* as disciplinary analytics (Durkheim [1912] 1995; Mauss [1925] 1967), and yet more recently have come to disavow or lament the nihilistic impossibility of translation (Asad 1986). There have been notable critical exceptions, in linguistic anthropology, to both this polemical legacy of translational “borrowing” as well as post-translational “nihilism” (cf. Michael Silverstein 2017, 2004). In their work, Michael Silverstein (2003a) and Greg Urban (1996) have elaborated some of the imbricated problems with both textual “translation” and its “impossibility,” demonstrating the limits of actualizing either in the strictly literary sense. The understanding here is perhaps that translation—insofar as it is understood to be a practice of “commensurating meaning” between languages—has analytical limitations when applied to a spoken language and its inextricable context of signification. This is because language, when understood to be inseparable from the life world of its community of users, is always a mutually constituting process rather than an object. Thus, it is more akin to a process, dialogically and semiotically unfolding in the moment to moment of real-time speech (Silverstein 2003a, 1976; Irvine and Gal 2000; Keane 1997, 2007; Agha 2007b; Urban 1996; Bakhtin 1981; Austin 1975). Thus the target and matrix languages in the context of a translation might be seen to be constantly under construction, rendering translation as a stabilization of meaning a somewhat remote goal. Yet outside of the Andersonian language ideologies of the “west,” this precariously maintained state of translation and translatability has never been about the stabilization of meaning, but rather the commitment to translational maintenance—both entextualized or interactional. For those committed to the endeavor of translation—like African students and their Chinese teachers in Beijing—the achievement of a translation, however imperfect or fleeting, exists as an unquestionable horizon of possibility, even if a durable permanence or stabilization never emerges.

Of course, in its more metaphorical uses, translation has been a classical concern for scholars of culture more or less up until the *Writing Culture* “crisis” (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Given the obvious, if somewhat problematized, resilience of this analytic (Spivak 1993; Derrida 1976; Sakai 1997; Chakrabarty 2000; M. Silverstein 2003a; Urban 1996) and its contestations (Asad 1986; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Abu-Lughod 1991) particularly in the domain of cultural translation, a key question emerges: How is it that a concept so closely associated with the formal uses of language seems to have such a broad purchase for an immensely divergent group of disciplinary concerns?

This question, however, presupposes language as a stable category to begin with—as though we know where language or multilingualism begins and ends. Rather, we should ask how purely linguistically a concept like translation glosses once the analyst unsettles the very category we call language to begin with. However, in the monolingual seminar rooms of Global North, such extensions of translation as metaphor don't even seem worthy of consideration in the work of scholars like Bruno Latour (1996), Adrian Mackenzie (2002), and Stefan Helmreich (2007). As indicated in the previous chapter, translation, in its posthuman framings—and particularly in the case of Latour—bypasses its linguistic and semantic associations in favor of generating the emergent nature of ontological legibility as both the object and outcome of translational or transductional processes that are left bracketed in their analyses. Here, the Southern scholar is compelled to ask: How does Latourian translation understand the relationship between emerging formations of subjectivity that are not in engagement with the translation or translation-defining Global North? In my case, the translational labor of Afro-Chinese interactants on Beijing's university scene would easily disappear in the network of social relations and cultural mediations enveloping subject formation in the definitions of non-representational or post-representational translation. Additionally, how would we do so without considering the fact that these subjects both speak and reflect on translation as reflexive process? Here, the preceding discussion provided a unique opportunity to engage these questions by way of demonstrating how cultural translation cannot be disarticulated from the culturally situated social relations practices, institutions, and infrastructures that translating subjects both performatively constitute and depend on.

However, such primitivist and Orientalist circulations differ drastically from the attempt at cultural translation unfolding between Professor Li and Patrice, and indeed within a great many other Afro-Chinese encounters unfolding at present. Rather, we can understand their respective recourse to *guanxi* and an *Ubuntu* translation of *guanxi* as standing in for a humanistic attempt to disrupt often alienating, machine-like, automatic, and bureaucratic social institutions that surround most other aspects of their interaction: the global inequalities and inevitable racisms that haunt Patrice's educational endeavor, and Professor Li's mostly under-appreciated and "hidden" affective labor in managing it. In the face of their respective but fundamentally unequal alienations of labor and personhood, both *guanxi* and *Ubuntu* can be seen as a refuge—a cultural space-time of reintegration representing transcendent cultural justifications for enduring forms of solidarity. Cultural translation, as a condition of possibility for generating such a cultural space-time, might only then be understood as a way of resisting a contemporary corruption of expectations of mutual obligation—perhaps suggestive of the spectral residue of "organic divisions of labor" within "mechanical divisions of labor" (Durkheim [1893] 2013; Benjamin 2007c). In this way, we might understand *guanxi* and *Ubuntu* as coming to ground third-world solidarity as the romantic promise



of a social bondage that mutually excludes the immediate, utilitarian purchase of the first world either by China or Africa. However, such speculative possibilities were less easy to discern, since both interactants were careful to hedge—despite frequent recourse to utopic imaginaries of culture and history—that these terms are not immune to historical forces and reappropriation, and certainly could not unfold in an ideological vacuum. Regardless of apparent obstacles, their attempts at cultural translation persist.

For subjects like Professor Li and Patrice, misrepresentations, misunderstandings, and mistranslations will and certainly do abound, but the attempt at translation—despite the violence of its failures—remains unmitigated between non-western others. These must be accounted for rather than denied, preferably by researchers from the Global South, and building analytical approaches to cultural translation that are drawn from contexts that disrupt, complicate, diversify, and provincialize encounters between the west and its Others. From this standpoint, cultivating a pragmatics of translation will be an important empirical starting point to decolonizing the study non-western, non-Anglocentric interactions and the framing of their polyphonous scales of cultural encounter.